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PROLOGUE

A LIFE ON HOLD - A HOLOCAUST MEMOIR

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PROLOGUE

The fairy tales my mother used to tell me when I was a little girl always had a happy ending. As I listened transfixed to the sad stories of Cinderella and her cruel stepmother, the adventures of Hansel and Grettel lost in the forest, and many others which Mother effortlessly spun from memory, I came to believe that in real life, too, there was always a happy ending. It was very reassuring. I would drift off to sleep peacefully, confident in my belief that everything would always be all right in the end.

Unfortunately, it didn't turn out that way. The bubble burst when Hitler's armies invaded Poland in September 1939, and one of the most horrific events in humankind's history was about to begin. I was twelve at the time. Almost overnight my comfortable, untroubled life turned into a nightmare.

New rules and regulations meant especially for Jews, were announced. We had to wear a yellow star in order to be easily visible to our tormentors. Going outside was no longer the simple task that it was in the past. I could no longer visit school friends who lived some distance away. Food became increasingly scarce and we often had to stand in lines in order to buy it. We had to get used to curfews and blackouts. We lived in a state of flux, never knowing what the next day would bring.

To survive, it was at times necessary to block out some particularly traumatic events that happened to me at that time. One of those, was our first displacement--the transfer

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to the ghetto, which should have been ingrained in my mind forever. Instead, it remained buried for a long time deep in my subconscious. I found it impossible to recollect even a single detail of that day. It was too painful. To this day I have trouble visualizing the long walk to the ghetto; my father and mother pushing a cart borrowed from a neighbor, I silently following the little cart loaded with the few necessities my parents could fit into it; and on top, some of my books without which I refused to leave.

After we left the city, my life, as I knew it before the German occupation of Lodz, remained only a memory. My parents couldn't offer me any reassurance; I was too old to be deceived by empty words. They could only express hope that the Germans would be defeated soon and we would resume our lives.

We remained under German rule for close to six years. During that time, the Jewish communities of Europe were almost totally wiped out. I lost both my parents and only managed to survive the war through incredible luck or providence. I ascribe my survival to having been "adopted" by the head of the Lodz ghetto, Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski--a man feared and despised by most ghetto inhabitants, who held him responsible for what was happening to them. In truth, he was only a puppet of the Nazis, who used him to do their devilish work.

What follows is my story as I remember it.

AUGUST 1939

The atmosphere of the city was different that summer. It was charged with electricity, a feverish expectation of evil that hung over it like a heavy cloud before a storm. The newspapers were full of screaming black headlines proclaiming Hitler's conquests of foreign places and his never ending demands for more territories. The newsreels showed excerpts from his many rallies and speeches, his arm raised in the Fascist salute, and the incredible, enormous sea of people shouting in one voice, "Sieg, Heil! Sieg, Heil!" I felt a strange fear invading my body at the sound of his loud, agitated voice and the sight of his face--the face that mesmerized millions into following his dictates. The radio carried Hitler's speeches in German, and even though I didn't understand the words, I could sense the dark undertones, and when at the end of each speech the shouting of the crowd began, I would press my hands to my ears to blot out the staccato intonations of the sea of people surrounding him.

In our neighborhood, little circles of people would form in front of certain buildings before each of Hitler's speeches. Some people didn't have radios, and it was customary for those living on the ground floor to open their windows and put their radios in public view on the windowsills, turning them on very loud so the speeches could be heard by those waiting outside. People listened with heads bowed, faces serious and drawn. The war was becoming more of a reality with each passing day. Even

though we had a radio, my father would go down to listen to Hitler's speeches with the other men gathered in the street. He was particularly interested in the discussions that followed the speeches, the predictions of some of the men that war was unavoidable, and more moderate assertions of those who believed that the war could still be averted through the intervention of England or the USA. The overall atmosphere, however, was pessimistic. It was hard for anyone to believe that Hitler would not carry out his threats.

I was twelve that summer and was looking forward to entering the seventh grade in the fall. I felt quite grown up and relished an ever increasing amount of independence, which allowed me to cross certain busy streets and go to more distant places unaccompanied by adults. I didn't leave the city all summer, but I didn't mind. I had joined a new lending library, one that carried books for adults only, and I had to bring a note from my mother stating that I was allowed to read those books. The library I had previously belonged to specialized in books for children. I had read most of the books they had and was ready for a change.

Lodz, the city where I was born, a center of industry with a population of close to 700,000 people, abounded in textile factories, and was frequently referred to as "Little Manchester." It wasn't a beautiful city, its industrial smokestacks spewing a constant cloud of thick acrid smoke, but there were some some nice things about it. Foremost, were the lovely parks to which I enjoyed going, either with friends or alone with a book. As a large metropolis, Lodz

had many movie houses where some of the newest movies were shown, mainly American, with a smattering of French, German and Italian. Poland had its own budding movie industry as well, specializing mostly in stark, serious dramas.

I could still recall when the Spanish Civil War figured prominently in the news a few years earlier. I knew even then that Spain was relatively far from Poland and that the war didn't present an immediate danger to us. Father, who was a socialist, sided with the Loyalists, of course, and followed the war in Spain very closely. His political affiliations, as well as his almost complete break with religious rituals, made him something of an anomaly in his family which had strict Orthodox roots. From what I had heard, my father's father had been a very religious man. I never knew him, as he died before I was born.

It had been my task on Saturday mornings, when our Orthodox Jewish newspaper vendor who delivered our papers all week, closed for the Sabbath, to get a paper for Father from a newsstand several blocks away. I especially enjoyed those Saturday missions. I would run both ways, pretending to be a secret messenger delivering important papers. I would arrive home invariably out of breath, to Mother's displeasure, but with a tremendous feeling of accomplishment. As I delivered the newspaper with its thick, ominous headlines, for father to read, I sat quietly awaiting his comments.

Sometimes I would ask Father to explain,

"Father, how come the Spaniards are fighting each other? It says that even brothers are sometimes on opposite sides."

"It might be hard for you to understand, but it's all about power. Spain had a democratically elected government which attempted to make radical reforms. The head of the opposition, General Franco, who represents a group opposed to those reforms, is trying to overthrow the elected government. He doesn't believe in democracy and claims that the power should belong to a leader such as himself. Those two opposing factions are fighting each other and the Spanish citizens have to take sides, sometimes splitting families by doing so."

I would listen attentively to Father's explanations, trying not to miss a single word. I had to concentrate very hard, as events were piling up at a furious pace. Strange names of places, battles and people commingled in my mind, but it was exhilarating to be able to follow all that was happening.

Toward the end of the summer of 1939, there was an appeal by the Polish government for all able-bodied men to help with the defense of our city by digging trenches in public places, mostly parks. Because Father had his own business, it was not difficult for him to close shop for a few days and volunteer to help. I asked him if I could go along to do some digging as well. Father smiled, and said that if I was up to the job, I could certainly go.

The idea of digging trenches was very exciting to me. I felt that we were doing something tremendously worthwhile and patriotic; that I was participating in a momentous event. The sense of impending danger was there, but above all, the sense of purpose was all-consuming. We would get up early, and after a light breakfast of sweet rolls and coffee (very

diluted with milk for me), Father and I would leave the house armed with sandwiches and cold lemonade for lunch. Outside, we would join a group of neighbors, mostly men and children, for the short walk to the park where the digging took place.

In the park, tools were distributed by members of the Civil Defense. After the first day, I would try to get one of the smallest shovels, for in spite of my enthusiasm, I would soon tire of the hard work in the hot August sun.

The digging progressed swiftly and in a matter of days we were several feet into the ground. It was cooler there, surrounded by the damp, dark earth, but I felt uneasy, afraid that I wouldn't be able to get out without Father's help. Oddly, a spirit of light-hearted camaraderie prevailed, which diminished my fears somewhat. People were still hoping that all these preparations would be for naught, and that in the end the war would somehow be averted.

The park where the digging took place held fond memories for me; I had spent a large part of my childhood there. As a small child I would go to this park accompanied by my mother, to play in the sand, go on the seesaw or the sliding pond. When I was older, I was allowed to visit the park alone because it was very close to our house. We lived on a street called Kilinskiego, named after a Polish patriot. The park was also named after the same man.

The trenches were not being dug in the playground area, but in a part frequented by adults--some with baby carriages, some with older children, some alone. That was where I liked to spend time. Unlike the playground, this was a lovely,

well-kept area with old, shady trees and magnificent multicolored flowers that bloomed all summer long. Every year in June, the slotted brown wooden benches would be exchanged for glossily painted white ones. I thought that the park was serene and elegant; I loved to relax there immersed in a book. Now those pretty benches had been pushed aside, and the wide walks were being turned into trenches. I felt a pang of sorrow to see this park mutilated; part of my childhood was being destroyed with it.

There was another park not too far from where I lived, which was really my favorite. It was near my school, and my friends and I would go there often after school. Much larger than the Kilinskiego park, it was named after a Polish writer, Henryk Sienkiewicz, whose best known book, "Quo Vadis," was translated into many languages. In that park, my friends and I would play games that required two teams; war games whose object was to conquer the opponent's territory. The person caught on enemy's turf would be taken prisoner. Those were the days of innocence; we had no inkling what being a prisoner really meant.

The impending war occupied my thoughts a lot that summer. Before falling asleep at night, I would lie awake trying to imagine what it would be like if we had a war. I knew that war meant bombing, so I tried to figure out what would be the safest place for us to hide in. After giving it some thought, I decided on the local movie theater where I had spent some of my best hours lost in a world of make-believe. The theater I chose was called "Ikar," Polish for the

legendary Icarus, who, in order to escape imprisonment flew away on artificial wings made of wax. As he neared the sun, his wings melted and he drowned in the sea--a fate I feared, that might be in store for many of us, allegorically speaking. The movie theater I chose was very large, and in my mind's eye I imagined it as the perfect haven for our neighborhood people. I could visualize them filing in with their bundles, the children carrying their favorite toys, and sitting down on the soft velvet-covered seats. The theater would be dim, but not completely dark. It would be a place where time would stand still--nothing bad could happen there. Comforted in my belief that I had found a safe place where not even the Germans could harm us, I would fall peacefully asleep. I desperately clung to this last shred of hope--I had to, for I could not imagine ceasing to exist.

In the meantime, our building was being prepared for the coming emergency. The small, dark storage cellar had been transformed into a bunker to be used in case of an air raid. The old sofas, chairs and tables which tenants had left there, would be useful during the time we were to spend in the cellar. Gauze masks were being readied in case the Germans would use poison gas. I thought it was a pretty silly measure against poison gas, but the Air Raid Wardens were dead serious when they demonstrated how to dip the masks in a baking soda solution and put them over our mouths. We never found out if the masks worked. The Germans didn't have to use poison gas to conquer the city of Lodz; they had an easy enough task without it. They encountered hardly any resistance.

SEPTEMBER 1939

On the first of September, Hitler's Armies invaded Poland; we knew that it wouldn't be long before they reached Lodz. For six days everyone was waiting for something to happen, cancelling their usual activities, staying home from jobs and listening to the radio for the news. It was a time of unease--rumors flying and changing hourly--but the Germans were definitely moving forward. Finally, on the evening of September 7, there was a terse radio broadcast, announcing an upcoming air raid.

"Remain calm! Get off the streets immediately! This is not a test!"

The dreaded moment had come--this time it was for real; the German army was advancing on Lodz. When the "All Alert" sounded, my parents and I joined the other tenants in the cellar. Candles, drinking water and first aid supplies were brought in and gas masks were distributed. Some of the able-bodied men, including my father, volunteered to become air raid wardens. It was their duty to patrol the streets and direct people stranded outside to the nearest "bunker." No one had experienced an air raid before; no one knew what to expect.

It was very quiet in the cellar, but one could feel the tension mounting. Even the little children didn't make any noise; they just sat silently on their mothers' laps, their wide open eyes the only indication of their fright.

To me, the stay in the cellar and the subsequent bombing had an air of utter unreality. I knew that what was

happening was real, but somehow, it seemed almost as if a play was being staged in which I was a silent participant, observing myself playing a part in a stage production. The hurried descent to the cellar was a prelude to a completely new phase in my life. In a way, it was the end of my childhood; a rude and sudden interruption of the natural flow of events which made up my life till then. What followed was scary, incomprehensible and dehumanizing. It was a loss of personal options which are the right and privilege of civilized people. We entered into bondage unquestioningly and unbelievably. No one in modern times had an imagination wild enough to predict what was yet to come.

In the meantime, all was quiet in the streets--not a sound was heard, save the occasional footsteps of the wardens patrolling the neighborhood. There was a morgue-like quality as the night, black and starless, descended upon us. From time to time, one of the wardens would stop by to bring news of what was happening outside.

The news was that nothing was happening--we were waiting--waiting for the German planes to reach the city. From the radio we learned that the Germans were proceeding by land and by air, encountering little resistance.

Airplanes, until now, were to me large, silvery birds, cutting elegantly through the skies and disappearing behind white clouds to emerge again, unscathed. I would crane my neck to follow their movements until they were far beyond the horizon. Airplanes meant Independence Day parades, when they would fly in formation like birds in a flock, performing

acrobatic feats in the sky. To me, airplanes weren't meant for dropping bombs; this was a new concept, something I had to get used to.

Around midnight, sounds of the offensive began to be heard, the stillness of the night interrupted by loud detonations. They sounded fierce enough to destroy us all, but as they came and went amid the roar of the airplanes, we were still sitting there, unharmed. Nobody spoke, only an occasional murmur of a prayer was heard, barely audible over the din of explosions. And then it was quiet--not a sound was heard for a long time, while we sat warily, waiting for the bombing to resume. It didn't.

After some time, the loud detonations of the bombs were replaced by the rhythmic discharge of machine guns and the clamorous sound of grenades bursting out all around us, enveloping us with turbulence, close and frightening. Our house was near a railroad station, one of the targets the Germans were aiming at.

Soon the noise became intolerable--we heard fragments of shrapnel hitting our building. I looked up at the tiny cellar window; what I could see of the sky was red, lit up by nearby fires. A few people were beginning to panic, but on the whole there was very little noise, only the slow, repetitious chanting of a Hebrew prayer interspersed with the rapid rat-tat-tat of machine guns.

Just then my father walked in.

"I am all right," he said. "Miraculously, no buildings in our area were hit by bombs, only by small fragments which

did little or no damage."

"Can't you stay with us, Father?"

"No. I must go out again to resume my patrol. Don't be scared. We will be all right."

I wanted him to stay, but I knew he had a job to do. Trying in vain to remain calm, I was shaking uncontrollably. Mother put her arms around me. Every time an explosion came, my body jerked and Mother's arm tightened around me. Detonations were coming one after another, their noise ear-shattering and terrifying as they burst, their fragments sputtering and falling to the ground like lava from outer space.

And then it was quiet again. We sat motionless, anticipating the next explosion, but it didn't come--only a stillness, as we waited in the dark. A few minutes went by, no shots, no explosions.

Suddenly, one of the wardens burst in, shouting,

"This is the end. The Germans are coming in. They are taking the city!"

An old man intoned a Hebrew prayer. I could make out the words, "Adonai Elohenu..." (Almighty God) The rest was lost in the tumult. All of a sudden, everyone was very much alive--children crying, women wringing their hands, some men standing at the cellar entrance, some in the courtyard, forming little groups.

Somewhere in the distance, sounds of tanks passing by began to penetrate the stillness. The invasion must have taken less than four hours, but it seemed to me like an

eternity had passed. Dawn was coming, the light slowly creeping in, shedding light on our tired, wan group.

Another era was beginning. A new, altogether different world was being born out of the turbulence of the night.

I experienced a strange sensation of fear mixed with exhilaration.

"We are alive! We survived the bombing."

"Come, dear, Mother said. "We might as well go home."

Dawn did not bring a peaceful day. Tense groups of men gathered in the courtyard, discussing their options. The consensus of opinion was that it was unsafe for young men to stay in the city. But although Lodz was now in German hands, the war wasn't over yet; the Germans were still a distance away from the capitol, Warsaw, and the Polish government was waging an all out effort to prevent them from conquering this most important city; they were sending reinforcements from all over the country. Radio communications urged all able-bodied men to come to the defense of Warsaw.

Most of the men who had gathered outside our apartment building were not planning to go to Warsaw. They couldn't leave their families, they said, it was of no use, it wouldn't do any good, Poland had to fall into German hands sooner or later. Only a few of them decided to join the retreating Polish army and fight for Warsaw. My father was among the latter. They decided to leave right away and proceed on foot until they caught up with the army.

Leaning out the open window, I could catch fragments of their conversation,

"We must hold onto Warsaw by all means possible. It's our only chance. With Warsaw defeated, there will be no Poland left."

Some of the men thought they might go to the Soviet Union, but soon the groups broke up, each man making his own decision. Father came upstairs and told us briefly what his plan was. He would be leaving right away with the other men who were going. I listened silently, not daring to ask any questions for fear that I would burst out crying. Mother had tried in vain to persuade him not to go. In the end, her face ashen, she started to pack the few necessities that Father was taking with him.

"Be good, and listen to Mother, darling. I'll see you soon," were his parting words to me. "I must go to fight for Poland. Warsaw will fall if we don't get every man and boy to help. Here my life may be in danger. The Germans may send Jewish men away. I will be back."

A quick hug and he was gone. I remained at the door, too hurt to say anything. I could comprehend the words, but I couldn't forgive Father's actions. He wasn't a soldier. Why did he have to go when most of the other men stayed with their families? We had been a close-knit family, the three of us. I needed some explanation, something that would justify Father's actions. I turned to Mother.

"Why did Father have to leave when so many men are staying? He cannot even fight with the army. He doesn't have a gun."

"He doesn't need a gun. He could help in other ways,"

came her weary reply. And anyway, if they have to shoot, they'll be given guns. Lets try to get some sleep."

* * *

The beginning of the German occupation was traumatic for me in more ways than one. My father went away leaving Mother and me alone. After the terrifying, sleepless night spent in the cellar I was exhausted and craved sleep more than anything. Sleep would bring oblivion, a respite, even if temporary, from the horrible events of the previous night. I wanted to forget what had happened last night, for as long as I could. I fell into bed without bothering to undress. Sleep came instantly.

I woke up a few hours later with a feeling of dread. Something was making me anxious, I didn't know what. I opened my eyes, slowly adjusting to the darkened room. It was very quiet. I tried to recall what day of the week it was; ordinarily, there would be noises from the street, but today there was a Sunday stillness. Yet, I didn't think it was Sunday. Suddenly, it dawned on me. The war had broken out, the Germans had conquered Lodz, and Father was away, gone to the front to help with the defense of Warsaw. A shiver ran through my body. Jumping out of bed I ran barefooted to the kitchen. Mother was at the stove making coffee. I sat down at the table, as I had so many times in the past, watching Mother busy herself with breakfast chores. But now, the kitchen seemed empty without Father at the table.

"What is happening, Mother? Can we go out today?"

"I think it's all right to go out. We could visit Aunt Gucia and Uncle Aron to see how they are."

"I would like that. I hope they're all right."

The Hermans, Aunt Gucia, Uncle Aron and their daughter, Bela, lived only a few streets away. Once outside, I realized why it had been so quiet this morning. The streets were practically empty. Last night's bombing did very little damage to the houses we passed. Apart from a few shrapnel holes dug into the bricks, little pock marks here and there, the buildings were unscathed. To get to the Herman's we had to pass the railroad station. The damage there was more severe--several buildings were hit, spreading rubble all around them.

It was obvious that the Germans' objective was not to destroy the city. Lodz had a large population of people of German extraction and their cooperation had made it easier for the Germans to conquer it without inflicting too much damage. Because of its heavy textile industry, our city was of great importance to them.

It didn't take us long to arrive at my aunt and uncle's apartment. Mother's sister, Gucia greeted us at the door. She was a fairly tall woman, her graying hair cut short. Plain-looking, she made an impression mainly because of the way she carried herself, straight as a ramrod. Uncle Aron was very tall and thin. He reminded me of a scarecrow. A quiet man, he liked to find solace in a book.

I used to visit the Herman's often before the war, sometimes reading while waiting for my cousin, Bela to finish

her homework. Bela, like me, was an only child. She was very pretty, with a light complexion and red hair which fell loosely down her shoulders. When she was younger, her unruly hair would usually be braided, most of the time in one thick braid.

Aunt Gucia waved us in.

"How are you? I was so worried about you!"

Mother was immediately barraged with questions about last night's bombing and how it affected us. The Hermans took it for granted that Father was home. When Mother told them what had happened, they were astonished; they couldn't understand why Father felt the need to go to the front and fight for the Poles.

"There is no telling how the Polish soldiers will treat Jews." Uncle Aron said. "Everybody knows how anti-semitic the Polish army is."

The conversation turned to the future of the Jews under German rule. Uncle Aron anticipated bad things, but he didn't elaborate.

Aunt Gucia asked Mother if she had stocked up on food staples, because shortages and price gouging were certain. She had the foresight to buy large quantities of flour, sugar and other groceries. My mother had a more relaxed approach to life. Whether from an innate optimism, or inertia, she didn't buy more than the usual amounts. She assured her sister that she would purchase whatever she could get as soon as possible.

While the adults were talking, my eyes scanned the

Hermans' living room, where everything seemed exactly as it always was, peaceful and serene, not an item disturbed by last night's bombing. I always enjoyed visiting the Hermans, because I liked my cousin, Bela, very much. She didn't treat me like a little child, but spoke to me without condescension, telling me about some of the books she had read and movies she had seen. She would recommend books for me to read, and at times would lend me some of hers, or give me those she no longer wanted. I enjoyed our talks, but Bela was busy studying most of the time and aunt Gucia spoke in whispers, so as not to disturb her.

Today, Bela was in a somber mood. I didn't know why, but Mother told me later that uncle Aron had decided to send her to live with his relatives in a small town called Kielce, where he thought she would be safer. Bela was very upset at the prospect of leaving her parents and tried to convince her father to change his mind. Unfortunately, she hadn't succeeded.

On the way home, Mother chose a different route than before. She wanted to see if any of the stores on a busy shopping street would be open. Some of them were. The Jewish bakery, where Mother used to buy bread, rolls and delicious cookies was open. We went in and Mother bought some of my favorite cookies, as well as bread and rolls.

A lot of the stores were closed in this predominantly Jewish neighborhood. When the German army entered Lodz, the local Germans immediately began to loot Jewish stores.

We continued walking. Suddenly Mother stopped.

"Oh, my God."

I looked at her. "What is it, Mother?"

She pointed to the store directly in front of us. It was our shoemaker's shop. We had known him for as long as I could remember--he always fixed our shoes. Now, in the window of his shop, prominently displayed, was a picture of Adolf Hitler, surrounded by a large German flag. Superimposed on the red background was a black swastika, the symbol of the Nazi party. It was the first of many such displays that we were to encounter in the days that followed.

"I didn't even know he was German," Mother said. "He had a Polish name."

He was probably a second or third generation Pole of German descent. Now, many of these so called "Volksdeutsche" identified with the victors and displayed Nazi symbols such as the one we just saw, to proclaim their loyalty. To the Jews, these symbols became objects of fear.

Mother and I continued on our way home, disheartened. I couldn't help being afraid. Who is going to take care of us, with Father away? I knew that Mother was worried, too, but she tried to be cheerful so I wouldn't be upset.

The next few weeks were chaotic and frightening. Many rules meant especially for Jews were enacted almost immediately. The first was a curfew. We were not allowed to leave our homes between nightfall and morning. Other edicts followed, but even if they weren't breaking any rules, Jews were subjected to terrors and indignities. Men, in particular, were sought out for persecution in the form of

physical labor that had no other purpose than to demean and hurt them both physically and psychologically.

It was no longer safe to be out in the streets. The yellow armbands we had to wear made us easy targets. Every time we had to leave the house, each trip to a store was fraught with danger. The Jewish stores that were still open could also be easily identified by the yellow star and the word "Jude" that was now required.

Three weeks had gone by and still there was no word from Father. Warsaw continued to hold out despite heavy losses. What was left of the Polish army was concentrated in the vicinity of Warsaw, but there was little hope for victory. The depleted Polish army could not defeat Hitler's powerful armed forces. It was becoming clear that the Poles were fighting a losing battle.

I missed Father a lot. Waking up in the morning, I would forget that he was away and would go into the kitchen expecting him to be sitting at the breakfast table, but he wasn't there. We didn't even know if he was alive.

"Why doesn't he write?" I kept asking Mother. "Do you think he is all right?"

All I got in response was a shrug of her shoulders.

OCTOBER 1939

Warsaw fell on September twenty seventh and the partition of Poland began. A section of eastern Poland was taken over by Russia. The central part, including Warsaw, became a German protectorate, and the western area where Lodz was located was annexed to the Third Reich. Witch hunts began immediately, with Jews being singled out for alleged anti-German activities. Mother's brother, Gerszon Lichtenstein, a dedicated Zionist who had been a fund-raiser for The American Joint Distribution Committee, was accused of being an American spy and immediately arrested. He was sent to the Dachau Concentration Camp where he perished. After his arrest his wife and two teenage children left Lodz for Warsaw. They didn't survive the war.

The city of Lodz, with its large German population and major textile industry, became one of the little jewels in Hitler's crown. Soon after its invasion, the Germans decided to move the entire Jewish population of Lodz to an old and decrepit section on the outskirts of the city called Baluty, most of which was already inhabited by Jews. This small area was to become the second largest ghetto in Poland. No other city in Poland became Germanized to the degree that Lodz did, nor as hermetically sealed. Within a short period, its name was changed to Litzmannstadt.

After the fall of Warsaw, the roundups of Jewish men for menial work intensified. Rumor had it that some of the people who had gone to Warsaw were returning. Mother and I lived from day to day hoping that Father would come home

soon. The chilly autumn weather was a reminder for me that I should be in school, but public schools had not reopened in September as usual. I had caught a cold and was in bed feeling miserable with a fever and a sore throat. It was almost lunchtime. Mother was in the kitchen preparing my lunch--steaming hot chicken broth, her perennial cold remedy. Only this time it wasn't a broth made from chicken, as in the past, but a bouillon cube dissolved in a cup of hot water. She brought it to me on a tray with a roll on the side. I tasted the broth and made a face. It was quite different from the chicken soup Mother used to make, but chickens weren't easy to come by anymore. I had never had bouillon before and found it too salty for my taste. Like other ersatz products, it would soon become a part of our wartime diet and be treasured when available.

I was sipping the broth when the doorbell rang. Mother went to open the door. I heard no voices for a few minutes. Curious, I called out in my hoarse voice,

"Who is it, Mother?"

There was no answer. Instead, Father's tall figure appeared in the doorway.

"Daddy, you came back!" I shouted, jumping out of bed.

"I guess I did," Father said, lifting me high in the air, the way he used to when I was a little girl. I held him close, examining him bit by bit. He looked tired and gaunt and he needed a shave. His clothes were dusty and not too clean and his shoes were covered with mud. He looked more

rugged than ever before. His light blond hair was longer than usual and his face was sunburned. But he was still my handsome father and his blue eyes twinkled as he watched me scrutinizing him. He carried a knapsack. In it was a large loaf of peasant bread. I touched it. Father smiled as he saw me admiring the bread. It was enormous.

"Where did you get it, Father?"

"From the peasants I was staying with."

Mother finally had a chance to ask a question.

"How did you come back, David?"

"Mostly on foot."

He sat down and began to tell us what had happened to him since he had left Lodz.

"We got as far as fourteen kilometers from Warsaw when the real fighting began. We helped with whatever had to be done. We were put up by Polish peasants, but as time went on, it became increasingly dangerous to stay there. The battles were fierce. Some of us decided to go back home and leave the combat to the soldiers who were in somewhat better shape than we were."

He paused, then went on. "We knew that the end was very near. We couldn't hold out any longer--Warsaw had to fall. I didn't want to be caught by the Germans fighting with the Polish army, so here I am. Aren't you glad I am back?"

My eyes still on Father's face, I couldn't find my voice. I shook my head silently.

"You must be awfully tired from walking all that

distance," Mother said. "Why don't you rest a while?"

"I think I'll wash up and we'll have lunch first. How would you like to taste some real peasant bread?" he asked, turning to me.

"I would love to, Father."

It seemed like we ate for a long time, the crusty bread strewing crumbs all over, all the while listening to Father's stories about the hard work he had to do, the constant air raids and bombings and the kindness of some of the Polish peasants. I couldn't get enough of Father's stories, until, tired from his long, strenuous trek home, he finally succumbed to a nap. It was so good to have Father home again! War or no war, at this moment I felt calm and secure.

October brought some other good news for me. Schools would be opening at the end of the month. I could hardly wait to see my school friends again, most of whom I had neither seen nor heard from since the beginning of the war. Because of the dangers awaiting Jews in the streets, I was no longer allowed to roam the city as I had before the war.

On the first day of school I got up earlier than I had to, jittery from excitement. At breakfast, Mother told me to dress warmly--it was very cold. Outside, the leaden skies threatened rain and a wintry wind blew, scattering leaves in its wake. I walked fast and arrived in school early. Passing through the familiar gate, my feeling of anticipation heightened--how many of my classmates would be there? Before the war, when the weather was good we were allowed to wait in

the schoolyard until the bell announced the beginning of the school day, but in bad weather we would go directly to our classrooms. Today, in spite of the cold weather, we had to wait outside.

At first, it seemed just like old times. The yard was full of girls congregating in small groups. My friends and I greeted each other, but not all of them were there. Before we had a chance to catch up, the loudspeaker summoned us to go to our classrooms.

The familiar rooms hadn't changed. The old wooden desks, each one with an inkwell, were still there. The teacher's high desk in front of the blackboard was still unchanged; what was different was that the huge tile oven, which ordinarily would have given off a comfortable warmth, was unlit. The room was so cold that we had to keep our coats on. The Polish janitor and his wife, who had endeared themselves to generations of students, were no longer there. Before the war, they used to serve tea at lunchtime, in their attic apartment above the school. In cold weather, it was worth every penny they charged. Their front room would turn into a makeshift tearoom full of girls. It was fun to be in the crowded room vying for a seat at the table, or standing when the seats were all taken, trying to balance a glass of hot tea while eating a sandwich brought from home and attempting to carry on a conversation at the same time.

Our school didn't have a lunchroom. It was a public school--its population close to seven hundred girls, all of them Jewish. The school prided itself on its reputation as

the best public school in the city. Students came from a large area; it was necessary to register early for the first grade. There was no kindergarten. I had attended a private kindergarten before I started school, and was quite proficient at reading. When Mother had taken me to register for first grade, I was given a reading test and put into the second grade. My school had a lot of after-school activities, among them a drama club and a rhythmic and dance class taught by a privately hired instructor and paid for by the students who attended the class. There was a grand piano in the school gym room where the classes were held. We danced and did gymnastics to the tunes of music.

The war had decimated the student body. They had left Lodz for what their families thought were safer places. Returning to school was not the happy occasion that it had always been. Our teacher, Mrs. Kolska, whom I had known since the second grade, took the attendance and proceeded to explain the new curriculum. Because of the German occupation it was severely restricted; some subjects had to be eliminated. We could no longer study Polish history or literature; geography was forbidden as well. Instead, we would be getting two foreign languages, German and Hebrew. The school day had to be curtailed due to a shortage of teachers--we would no longer be getting art lessons or gym.

The German textbook was very simple. It must have been printed before the Nazi takeover of Germany, as there was no mention of Hitler or his party. The book contained pleasant rhymes and stories, obviously meant for younger children. I

could tell that German would be easy. Hebrew seemed harder, the writing went from right to left and the alphabet was completely different, but I refused to worry about it.

After school I walked home with Hala, one of my best friends. We wanted to catch up on some of the things that had happened since we had last seen each other. It had only been a few months, but it seemed much, much longer. Hala lived on Cegielniana Street, a street popular with our classmates, as three of them lived within a few houses of each other. Two of the three, including my best friend, Ina, had left Lodz shortly after the outbreak of the war.

Before we knew it, we were in front of my building. We still had so much to talk about... We continued talking, not wanting to part.

"Could I come up for a while? I would like to say hello to your mother."

"Sure, but won't your mother worry about you not coming home after school?"

"Oh, no. I told her I might be late, just in case."

Like me, Hala was an only child, but her parents were much more relaxed about her whereabouts. Before the war both her parents had worked in a family-owned business, so Hala was left in care of a maid who allowed her to go wherever she wanted. I used to envy Hala her freedom, but now I felt safer close to home--I no longer had the desire to roam the city as I used to before the war.

"Isn't it great to be back in school?" Hala said.

"Even Mrs. Kolska wasn't the old dragon today that she

used to be before the war."

We both giggled at the memory of the strict teacher, who would drill us with the zealousness of an army sergeant. Today she had been subdued; her voice was quieter and her manner more gentle.

The school was a diversion while it lasted, but the teachers were different--they seemed to have lost their enthusiasm for teaching. Even those who used to be very strict and demanding had slackened off. They must have known what we didn't want to believe, that the school was an exercise in futility. It couldn't last. When the Jewish population of Lodz was forced to leave their homes for the ghetto, the schools had to close after about a month.

Before the war, I often used to get together with my classmates after school to go to the movies or to the park. Since the war had started, this was no longer possible. There were a few children in our building with whom I had sometimes played. The war had brought us closer together. We started to visit each other in the evenings to play games or cards. Even the adults became better acquainted during that period. People who hardly knew each other before the war became friendly because of the curfew which kept them out of the streets at night. Men would also get together evenings to talk about the war and share news gotten from clandestine radios.

When we moved to the ghetto, we lost contact with most of our neighbors as they dispersed to different parts of the ghetto. Everyone became too absorbed with the

difficulties of everyday living to have any energy to spare. I lost contact with my school friends as well. The only people we continued to see occasionally were close relatives, especially those who didn't live too far away.

In October, the Germans appointed Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski to be "The Eldest of the Jews." It had been said that the Germans had asked the assembled Jewish community leaders who their eldest was, and Rumkowski volunteered that it was he. Perhaps it was his patrician appearance and snow white hair that earned him the job. While we were still in the city, we knew little about him, other than that he had headed an orphans assylum before the war and was active in Jewish organizations. In the ghetto he became a notorious and much hated figure.

NOVEMBER 1939

Aunt Gucia came over to invite us to a Saturday lunch. She told my mother that she was preparing a "chulent"--a dish that was a Saturday tradition for Orthodox Jews, but a treat for us, as we didn't have it very often.

The "chulent" had to be prepared on Friday. Chunks of beef, potatoes, barley, dried lima beans, seasoning and water would be assembled in a heavy, enameled iron pot and covered tightly with a lid. The top of the pot was then wrapped in several layers of thick brown paper and tied securely with a string. On Friday afternoon the "chulent" was taken to a bakery which met the strict Jewish Orthodox laws and would remain in the oven overnight. It would be picked up on Saturday in time for lunch. Because of its fat content, the "chulent," after having baked all night, would be permeated with a wonderful blend of aromas and textures; the potatoes brown and succulent, the meat soft and juicy, the flavors commingling to form a delicious bond with each other.

Aunt Gucia didn't ordinarily make "chulent." Mother asked her if this was a special occasion.

"No," replied her sister, "I just felt like it."

Aunt Gucia could be very tight-lipped when she felt like it.

A little after noon on the following Saturday, my parents and I left for the short walk to the Hermans. The autumn sun was still giving off some warmth on this brisk day. In spite of the German occupation it felt almost like

old times, if one didn't notice the yellow armbands with the Star of David which Jews were now required to wear.

When we arrived at my aunt and uncle's apartment, I was full of anticipation for the "chulent," a seldom eaten favorite of mine. To our surprise, the door to their apartment was wide open, a most unusual thing for my careful and meticulous aunt to do.

"Gucia, are you there?" Mother called out.

There was no answer. We passed the kitchen without stopping and proceeded to the living room. The usually immaculate apartment was in a state of disarray, clothing and linens scattered on chairs and tables. The linen closet was open, most shelves empty. In the bedroom, the furniture was undisturbed, but the bed was stripped and the bedding removed. Their daughter, Bela's room seemed not to have been touched. Aunt and Uncle were nowhere to be seen.

Mother returned to the kitchen and looked into some of the cabinets. They were practically empty. My aunt's food supplies were gone, as were most of the dishes. On the stove sat the black pot containing the "chulent," steam escaping through the partially burned paper, its delicious aroma pervading the air.

"Where could they have gone so suddenly? I hope they are all right," Mother said.

Confused, we left the apartment leaving the door ajar.

"Wait, I will ask her neighbor," Mother added, as she rang the doorbell of the only other apartment on the floor. The familiar face of Aunt Gucia's neighbor appeared at the

door.

"Oh, I am so glad to see you. Mrs. Herman left a note for you," the woman said handing the note to Mother.

She went on to tell us that Aunt Gucia had just returned with the "chulent," when a friend of Uncle Aron's came to tell him that he had succeeded in finding an apartment for them in the old part of town, the area that was to become the ghetto. If they could leave immediately, he had a man with a wagon waiting outside to transport their belongings. Naturally, the Hermans had decided to seize the opportunity. There was no way to notify us in time. In the note, Aunt Gucia gave us their new address.

Father closed the Hermans' door. "Let's go," he said. Dejected, we went home, leaving the steaming "chulent" on the stove.

I felt sad. The day had started so well...

Aunt and Uncle's decision to move to the old city proved to be a wise one. The following weeks brought the beginnings of nightly evacuations of Jews from their homes to the old city. The Gestapo, aided by Polish janitors, would enter apartments occupied by Jewish families, order them to get dressed and take a few things they could carry. They had to leave their apartment right away and had to assemble in front of their buildings for the march to the old part of the city. These raids would always take place in the middle of the night. Awakened from sleep and terrified by the screaming soldiers who shoved and beat them unmercifully, most people left their homes without taking anything. Old

people, who were unable to keep up with the rest during the march, would be beaten most severely. My father's mother, a woman in her eighties, who lived with Father's sister, Hania and her family in a lovely part of the city, was one of the first to undergo this terrifying experience. She was never the same afterwards. She became senile and deteriorated rapidly.

While Jews realized that they were in for tough times, nobody imagined the magnitude of the tragedy that was to come. The Germans initiated several restrictions, one of them a curfew. We were not allowed to leave our homes between the hours of five P.M. and eight A.M. Cultural activities, such as movies or concerts were forbidden. The worst was that we had to wear yellow arm bands with a Star of David proclaiming our Jewishness. This made us easy targets. Going outside was fraught with danger, especially for men, who were singled out for manual labor and often tortured by the sadistic soldiers.

Within a short time we began to experience food shortages, although it was still possible to obtain groceries and meat at inflated prices, if one knew where to look and had the money to pay. The shortages were especially hard because of restrictions imposed on shopping in Aryan stores. Many Jewish stores were forced to close, became vandalized, or were taken over by German "Volksdeutsche". This was particularly true of Jewish bakeries; in a matter of weeks only a few of them remained open. It became necessary for Jews to seek out Polish bakeries which would allow us to buy their goods. While non-Jews could just walk in and

purchase whatever they wanted, Jews were told to line up outside the bakery. The lines were long--sometimes it took several hours before one's turn came. Often, by that time, the supplies were already exhausted. Even if they were not, there was always a limit on the number of items Jews were allowed to buy.

It was my friend, Frania, who introduced me to an easier way to get bread. Frania, who was two years older than I, lived in our building. A product of a broken home, she was a tough, streetwise urchin who was used to fending for herself. Frania was not afraid of anything or anybody and that included the Germans. With a bravado which was partly based on ignorance, she would frequently walk around without her Jewish star. With her mousy, straight blond hair cut short, and bangs over her forehead, small nose and green cat-like eyes, she was indistinguishable from Aryan kids. Frania explained to me one day how easy it would be for the the two of us to go to a bakery to buy bread and rolls if we removed our armbands with the Stars of David.

"Without them nobody would know that we are Jewish," she declared with unbeatable logic, adding triumphantly,

"And then we could get all the bread and rolls we want. Wouldn't your mother be happy?"

"Oh, I guess so, but I have to ask her permission."

"No. She would never let you go. Don't worry, I've done it many times. It's a cinch."

And so we went to the bakery. The one we particularly liked was quite a distance from where we lived, in a

neighborhood that was almost exclusively Aryan. I often went there with my mother, as the possibility of their running out of baked goods was less likely, as long as not too many Jews knew about its existence. It was still early morning when we arrived, but outside the bakery there was a long line of Jewish women of all ages. We walked past them, into the pleasant store fragrant with the aroma of freshly baked bread. We both gave our orders boldly, without so much as a tremor in our voices.

"A dozen rolls and a large rye bread, please."

It all seemed so easy! We paid and walked out with our purchases past the lined-up women. As we turned the corner, we burst out laughing.

"We must do it again," I said. "There is nothing to it."

We were walking and chatting happily, feeling very important, and aching to spill our secret to my mother. Along the way, two German soldiers passed us, and looking at the two of us obviously having so much fun, smiled. We smiled back. It was great to feel fearless, to forget our limitations, to forget even for a short time that we were Jews and that we weren't free anymore...

As we neared home, I noticed that something out of the ordinary was taking place. Several German soldiers were stationed across the sidewalks on both sides of the street and were stopping every man who wore a yellow armband. As we passed them, I felt uneasy without my armband, like a traitor to my people. We continued walking. A young Jewish boy in

the garb of the Orthodox Jews came into view from a side street, unaware of what was going on. A soldier grabbed him from behind by the collar and gave it a strong tug, sending the boy flying toward the truck which was waiting on the other side of the street. With an added kick, the young man was propelled onto the truck, more like an object than a human being. In the meantime, other soldiers appeared with their bounty. One of them was dragging an Orthodox Jew by his earlocks, inflicting, no doubt, terrible pain. The man's face was contorted with suffering, but he silently accepted the indignities imposed on him.

We were in front of our building, when from the corner of my eye I noticed my father about to go into the street. "Stop, don't go there--it's a trap!" I wanted to scream, but I knew that I must pass him without a sign of recognition. Father, realizing that something was amiss, quickly crossed the street and disappeared into the building opposite ours. He didn't come home for a couple of hours. Mother and I didn't know where he was. It turned out that he was safe--he had sought refuge with a Russian family with whom we were acquainted. He was confident that they wouldn't betray him.

While Father was out, I was numb with worry about him. Was he safe, or did the Germans spot him? My adventure didn't seem like fun anymore. I made a silent vow never to take my Star of David off again. On reflection, I didn't feel that I wanted the extra food if it meant pretending to be someone I wasn't. It was still possible to obtain bread at the Polish bakeries. In the future I

would go with my mother, as we had done in the past, and stand in the long lines with the other Jewish women. We would always go early to make sure that the bakery wouldn't run out of bread allotted to the Jewish customers. The morning chill would make me shiver and I would try to still my chattering teeth by huddling together with Mother.

The idea of impersonating an Aryan became suddenly repugnant to me. It seemed like a very frivolous thing to do.

DECEMBER 1939

In spite of the frequent house searches that the Germans carried out under the smallest pretext, Father was still able to do some work, but the market for the decorative items that he had produced before the war was no longer there. As in the past, he was always trying out different ideas. He hated to be idle. Because most Jewish women stopped wearing hats since the start of the war, Father designed a hood, using the black felt he had previously used for some of his other creations. He lined the hoods with a lightweight fabric of a different color. Thus a new item was born. Mother and I were his first "customers"--we loved the comfort and warmth of the hoods. Father took some samples to a distributor he knew; the hoods sold out in no time because they were warm and didn't attract attention the way fancy hats did. Father kept busy for as long as the materials lasted.

Unfortunately, the situation for the Jews continued to deteriorate as nightly raids in the city intensified. Even during the day it was becoming more and more dangerous to be out in the streets--for men especially. My parents were often talking about leaving the city, before the Germans had a chance to remove us forcefully in the middle of the night. Some of our neighbors were already gone; there was little talk about leaving--one would just find them gone one day and that was it; our building, which had a large Jewish population became progressively more empty.

Finally, one day my parents made the sudden decision to leave immediately and the quick and chaotic packing began.

Mother was fortunate to be able to borrow a little wagon from a neighbor. A couple of suitcases loaded with clothes, some utensils and a few other necessities such as bedding, were loaded onto the small wagon, and we were on our way, perhaps never to return. Many of my books came with us too--I insisted on taking them along. They were the only friends I had left. Our destination was the apartment of one of Father's sisters, Genia, who had married an elderly widower shortly before the war. I knew him only by his surname, Farber.

The Farbers set up house in Mr. Farber's apartment in the old part of the city, located in what was now designated as part of the ghetto. Mr. Farber, whose name in Yiddish means a dyer, suited his occupation--he had a dye factory in which wool and other yarns were dyed in all imaginable colors. My parents and I had visited the Farbers once before the war. Mr. Farber took us to his nearby factory and proudly showed off the huge vats spouting steaming fumes, and above, on the ceiling, suspended from hooks, wet skeins of yarns in every hue of the rainbow were hung up for drying.

Everything in the factory was stained with the many dyes, including Mr. Farber himself. His clothes and gray beard had multicolored streaks running through them, and his fingernails were purplish-black, which gave them a sinister look. In truth, everything about Mr. Farber seemed sinister to me, including his mannerisms and speech. He was old and cantankerous, his scraggly beard and wild gray hair falling haphazardly all over his face, his small, shifty eyes and leathery, wrinkled skin contributing to the bad

impression. He was very thin and his clothes hung on his gaunt frame, giving him a scarecrow-like appearance. He walked with a shuffle, supporting himself with a walking stick. His speech was rapid, his voice high-pitched, and he spoke in a Yiddish dialect I couldn't understand. Mr. Farber was not a native of Lodz, and his speech reflected the intonation of his place of birth, which was eastern Poland.

When the Germans started moving Jews from the central part of Lodz to the old city, almost all of Father's relatives descended on the Farbers for temporary refuge. It was hard to believe that the small apartment, consisting of a living room, large kitchen and two smallish bedrooms would hold as many people as it did for a period of several weeks, but somehow we all managed to coexist in comparative harmony.

There were nineteen of us, including several children. The Laufers--Father's sister, Hania, her husband, Berish, and two daughters, Saba and Fela. Two more of their children were no longer with them. Their only son, Shulim, who had been studying to be a rabbi, elected to leave to leave Lodz at the beginning of the war to stay with his rabbi in a town near Warsaw. Other relatives sought refuge at the Farbers as well. Father's mother and her sister Regina, Regina's son, Mayer with his wife and two children and Father's youngest brother, Moshe, with his wife and two boys. And finally, my parents and I.

Mr. Farber didn't take kindly to the influx of these comparative strangers. His temper grew worse with each passing day and he sought refuge in bed, engaging in frequent

tantrums. He had been suffering from asthma, which became aggravated by the presence of all the people around him. He coughed and wheezed a great deal, demanding constant attention from his wife and complaining incessantly about the noise, the crowded conditions and Grandmother's senility. He refused to leave his bed, even for meals. It was a hard time for Aunt Genia, but she seemed to be able to contain her husband with a few quiet words. Aunt Genia had been married previously, and divorced. She was a striking woman, not so much because of her looks, although she was not bad looking, but because of the color of her hair, which was carrot red, long and wavy. She and Mr. Farber made a strange-looking couple, as she looked young enough to be his daughter.

All of us were grateful to have a roof over our heads and did our best not to aggravate Mr. Farber. The apartment was warm and we had enough food, but the number of people crowded into such a small area created a problem, especially at night when we had to bed down in all kinds of places, including most of the floor, even in the small space under the piano.

I somehow managed to find solace in reading in spite of the many distractions. The books, which belonged mostly to my older cousins, Saba and Fela, helped me to distance myself from the present and transport me to a different, more civilized world.

In a matter of days after our arrival, Mr. Farber's condition deteriorated and his normally raspy voice changed to

a hoarse screech. He slept fitfully during the day and ate almost nothing, but at night, unable to sleep, he would forage into the kitchen in search of food, which he would devour with incredible speed, stuffing large amounts of anything he could find into his mouth, be it leftover meat, potatoes, or thick chunks of bread. He would not abide anybody's presence in the kitchen while he ate; anyone who walked in on him was subject to his ire. Nor was his wife immune to his outbursts.

One night, while Mr. Farber was in the kitchen eating, he started wheezing and coughing uncontrollably, awaking everyone. Remembering his admonitions, nobody dared to enter the kitchen, afraid to incur his wrath. Even his wife was anxiously waiting at the door calling out to him once or twice, but there was no answer. Finally, the coughing stopped. Aunt Genia opened the door a crack and at that instant there was a loud noise. It was Mr. Farber's falling body hitting the floor. Aunt Genia screamed. In a moment the kitchen was filled with people. Mr. Farber was on the floor in a heap, his lifeless body clad in a long, white nightshirt giving him the appearance of a rag doll; his mouth agape, his wide-open eyes staring, but no longer able to see.

It was the first death I had ever experienced and the memory of Mr. Farber's body continued to haunt me for a long time. Without Mr. Farber, the apartment seemed oddly empty and still. I came to miss his abrasive voice and his peculiar speech. Soon after, Father succeeded in getting a room for us, and we left Aunt Genia's house, as did the others.

JANUARY 1940

The ghetto was now a reality. The large Jewish population of Lodz, which had been evicted or fled their homes in the center of the city, had been resettled in the old part of town called Baluty. It soon became obvious that even though each family was given only one room, the old town, which was to become the ghetto, was much too small to house all the Jews, estimated as upward of 60,000. Before the war, the Jewish population of Lodz numbered close to 250,000, almost a third of the overall population of Lodz. As the war started, a large part of the Jewish population left the city for small towns, for the Soviet Union and other safer places.

Some areas which had been previously occupied almost exclusively by Aryans, had to be added to the ghetto, its residents relocated to apartments vacated by Jews.

My parents and I were assigned a room in a quiet, residential area. It was a neighborhood of small apartment houses and a few private homes. Our building had three stories and it housed about fifteen families, all in single rooms. The room we were assigned, was part of a two-room apartment joined by a narrow hall, with separate entrances to each room. The adjacent room was already occupied by three elderly people, two brothers and a sister.

Our room was fairly large and it contained some modest furniture, most likely left by the previous tenants. Two single beds, a chest of drawers, a small round table and three chairs, that was all. A stove, a coal bin and a small kitchen cabinet on the wall, made up the kitchen area. A

double window overlooked the yard, letting in the sun.

"Look at this," Mother exclaimed, "it comes all furnished--at least we will be spared the headache of trying to find something to sleep on, or worse, sleeping on the floor."

"It was very thoughtful of them..." Father added. His sarcasm wasn't lost on me.

I looked at the two narrow beds.

"But there is no bed for me. Where will I sleep?"

Mother looked at me for a minute, as though deciding where I would sleep,

"It looks like you will have to sleep with me, for the time being. There's no other way. We have to make do with whatever we have. Even if we could get another bed, there's hardly any space for it here. This is not forever--the war will end and we will return to our old apartment."

I could see that Mother was upset, but she wouldn't allow herself to dwell on our present situation.

"We have a lot to do. Why don't you give me a hand with making up the beds," she said, handing me a pillowcase.

I looked around the room. After three weeks of living in the cramped space at the Farbers, even this one room was an improvement--it was all ours.

Father had gone outside to look around. I decided to do the same. I had never been out of the city in the winter. This was the closest to a country setting I had ever seen. The street was lined with small buildings surrounded by lawns and trees and enclosed by neat wooden fences. It had snowed

a few days ago and the trees were still covered with powder-like flakes, their bare branches white and delicate, looking like exquisite lace from below.

When I returned to our room, Mother had finished making the beds and found a place for our clothes on the wall, suspended from a hook. Smaller, foldable items were stuffed into the small chest of drawers.

Father was back, too. He had found a shed outside that must have belonged to the janitor and returned with various tools and planks of wood, which, he said, would be perfect for bookshelves. I had never seen my father do any carpentry work before, but here he was, measuring, sawing and putting up shelves in the doorway that connected our room with the other one. It was a perfect niche for the shelves. Soon my books would have a home.

Later that evening, as I lay in the bed that I was to share with Mother, all kinds of thoughts were cluttering my mind, keeping me from falling asleep. I was glad that we had a place of our own, no matter how small, but the narrow bed wasn't meant to accommodate two. I was cramped, as I was sure Mother was, but she didn't complain. I could feel her body next to mine, but couldn't see her in the darkened room. The blanket covering the window didn't let in even a single ray of light--these were blackout rules imposed by the Germans.

What will become of us? Will the war end soon, as my parents kept telling me? They always reassured me when I asked them, but I was not convinced that they themselves knew.

FEBRUARY 1940

The days in the ghetto were dragging; there wasn't much to do and little to look forward to. I was bored. I missed school and my friends, who were scattered throughout the ghetto. My books were all shelved, but the prospect of rereading once more some of my old books didn't seem too enticing. I was able to borrow a few books from our upstairs neighbors, but it wasn't enough. One day, a thought occurred to me; what if I put my books to use and opened a lending library for people in our building. I didn't have too many books for adults, so I decided to ask each person who wanted to join to bring at least one book, if they had one to donate. My idea worked and soon my lending library became popular with our neighbors; most people weren't working yet, so they had plenty of time to read. I kept track of the circulation and made up cards for the borrowers, but I soon realized that if I wanted the library to continue, I had to get more books. There was one lending library left in the ghetto. I decided to go there to inquire if they would sell me some of their books. They did have some books to sell. All of them for adults. Mother and I bought as many as we could carry. I was thrilled; now I have good books to lend to our neighbors and I could read them as well. A few of the books I read still stand out in my memory, among them, "The Microbe Hunters," by Paul de Cruif. Reading it, I was convinced that I was suffering from each of the diseases described therein. There were other books I liked a lot, some by Scandinavian authors unknown to me. One, a Swedish

writer, Selma Lagerloeff, wrote heart-rending stories of hunger, oppression and misery. Her books were far from cheerful, but I devoured them, anyway. I also liked books by Jack London, an American writer.

Mother and I went back once more to buy some more books. Like the first time, we bought as many as we could carry. Shortly thereafter, the library was not permitted to function anymore. The books I bought were excellent; the people who read them were very pleased.

In the meantime, most of the buildings on our street became filled with families who had fled the city. The street reverberated with voices of children, climbing and running, seemingly oblivious of the precarious times. I didn't have any playmates, but I felt too old to play. Besides, I preferred to spend my time reading. To think that I almost left my books behind when we were leaving for the ghetto! Without them I wouldn't have had my lending library to keep me busy, nor all the wonderful books to read.

One cold February day Aunt Gucia came over to invite my parents and me for lunch in their new apartment. I couldn't help but think of the last time we were invited to the Hermans for lunch, when we were confronted with their empty apartment--the day they had left unexpectedly for the ghetto. I was hoping that this time things would go better. When we entered the Hermans' new apartment, I was pleasantly surprised--it was a real apartment, not just one room, like ours. It was bright and cheerful, and because the Hermans were able to bring some of their furnishings and

even some small pieces of furniture with them, Aunt Gucia managed to instill it with a homey air. We entered through a large room which combined a kitchen with a living area. There was a bedroom also, a real luxury in the ghetto. Aunt Gucia fixed the place up with curtains on the windows and plants on the windowsills. The plants, geraniums with bright red flowers gave the sun-filled place an almost countryfied air. Prominently displayed on one of the walls, was a large portrait of their daughter, Bela, which they had brought from their city apartment. It was painted by Uncle Aron's sister, an artist. It was a lovely pastel painting, which captured Bela's pretty face and red hair.

A familiar aroma of barley and mushroom soup permeated the place; an aroma which I would come to associate with Aunt Gucia. Mother asked about Bela. Aunt Gucia whispered,

"She is begging us to let her come home. She wrote a separate letter to her father imploring him to let her return to Lodz. But he's adamant. He won't budge."

Aunt Gucia seemed very upset, an unusual emotion for my usually cool and controlled aunt to exhibit, but when Uncle Aron joined us, she quickly put on a pleasant face. We sat down to lunch, but the cheerful apartment didn't seem to me so cheerful anymore. My heart ached for Bela, all alone in an unfamiliar place. What had possessed Uncle Aron to do this to her? Did he really think that she could be happy away from her parents at a time like this? The letter Aunt Gucia told Mother about, was the last letter the Hermans received from Bela. She died a few weeks later after contracting meningitis.

Looking around the room, I noticed another familiar portrait. It was a sepia photograph of my maternal grandfather, Moshe Mendel Lichtenstein. Although I recalled him only vaguely, as he died when I was less than two years old, I had heard a lot about him from my mother. He was remembered by his children with love and admiration. A lumber merchant, he had traveled a great deal and had died relatively young, leaving behind, in addition to his children from his first marriage, a second wife, grandmother Fela, and her three daughters. My mother's Mother had died while still very young.

Grandma Fela was unlike any grandmother I had ever met. For one thing, she was younger and much more modern. She spoke Polish fluently and read a Polish daily newspaper, which she would bring with her when she came to visit. She would tell me about the serial romances it featured in daily installments--she followed them religiously.

Grandma Fela would stay with me sometimes, when I was sick and Mother had to go out. I loved the stories she would conjure up. I also liked watching her peel an apple, starting at the top, and going all the way down to the bottom without breaking the peel. Her daughters, Karola and Petka, a nickname for Esther, were both young, but very different in appearance and temperaments. Petka, the younger one, wore makeup and bright red lipstick. Karola was plain-looking and wore dowdy, oldmaidish clothes and no makeup. Their oldest sister, Celina, died in childbirth shortly before the war. Grandma Fela and her daughters were sent to their death during one of the selections in the ghetto.

MARCH 1940

Our room was still awfully bare, bereft of any homey touches. There was very little we were able to take with us when Father made the sudden decision to leave for the ghetto. We had to leave behind most of the everyday necessities that would have made life easier now. One morning, Mother looked around the room and shook her head as if making a sudden decision.

"How would you like to go to our old neighborhood, dear? We'll go to our apartment and try to pick up a few of the things we had left behind. I've heard that the guards don't bother women or children passing through the gates."

"Oh, yes, Mother, I would love to go! Let's go right away!"

This expedition seemed like a great adventure to me. Besides, I longed to see our old apartment again, even for a short time. Father looked up from his woodworking project, hammer in hand.

"You better be careful."

"We will be very careful. I've heard from women who went out of the ghetto that it's safe. The ghetto will be permanently closed soon, so there's not much time left. I'll see if I can borrow a little wagon. And dear, get dressed warmly; it's very cold today and we have a long way to go."

I quickly wrapped a woolen scarf around my neck.

"I'll be fine, Mother. Let's go."

As we set out, the winter sun was bright, reflecting in the frozen puddles. There was a mild wind, the breeze

cool and refreshing. It felt good to be outdoors in spite of the cold. I was full of anticipation; I often thought of our old apartment. Living in the ghetto was so different--all three of us cramped into one room.

All of the ghetto was enclosed by a very high barbed wire fence. The exit we took was the most convenient one from our house. As we neared the gate I became intimidated by the sight of the German soldiers. There were several of them keeping watch at the gate, big and powerful looking, their rifles slung over their shoulders. I was afraid that something terrible was going to happen to us, but Mother and I crossed the gate without incident--no one stopped us--the soldiers didn't seem to be paying much attention. We were the only ones leaving.

We left the ghetto and continued on our way. In a few minutes we reached a familiar area, very different now from the way I remembered it. Once full of Jewish stores, crowded with shoppers and passersby, it was now virtually deserted. Many of the stores were closed; some of the open ones had swastikas in the windows.

We entered our building without encountering anyone, not even a child playing in the yard. I quickly ran up the one flight of stairs, impatient to get into the apartment. Mother still had the key, but when I turned the knob, the door opened. It was unlocked. I walked in, followed by Mother. No one was there. It looked ghostly, so different from the way it had been when we had lived there. The living room was stripped of most of the furnishings. The curtains,

pictures on the walls and other objects were gone. Only the large pieces of furniture remained, scattered forlornly like homeless animals. Almost anything that could be carried out disappeared. The kitchen looked least disturbed. Mother picked out a few pots, some pans, cutlery and china, and put them in the basket. On my desk I found all my books exactly as I had left them.

"Look, Mother," I cried out. "My books are all here."

Old friends--I had reread some of them many times. Remnants of my childhood, books by Louisa May Alcott, "Alice in Wonderland" and the sequel, "Through a Looking Glass," were favorites, as was "Robinson Crusoe," a birthday gift from my cousin, Bela.

"Here, put them all in the bag and let's go. We will stop at the janitor's to give him the key," Mother said, turning abruptly away, so that I wouldn't see the tears in her eyes.

I looked back for the last time, as Mother walked to the door. "Goodbye, home," I whispered to myself. "I won't forget you. I will come back some day."

The janitor wasn't home, but his wife greeted us warmly, although with some surprise.

"How nice to see you again, Mrs. Kochaner. How are you? Where are you living now?"

They exchanged small talk, as though we had only changed apartments, not been forced to flee our home. I looked around The janitor's small apartment, which I remembered seeing before; the familiar crucifixes and

pictures of the Holy Family were still gracing the walls, but the room looked somehow different--I couldn't explain why. Suddenly it occurred to me that it was much more crowded. That was the difference! It looked more like a storage area now, full of boxes loaded with crystals and china. An assortment of silver dishes, from sugar bowls to ceremonial Jewish goblets, seemed oddly out of place amid the Christian icons. There were boxes full of linen, and some filled with clothes. As my eyes grew accustomed to the overabundance of objects in the small room, I spotted some familiar things which I was sure had belonged to us, among them a bronze clock--a familiar fixture from my childhood. Other things attracted my attention; familiar-looking crystals and knick-knacks. I stifled a desire to cry out.

Mother was saying goodbye to the janitor's wife, calmly, as though she hadn't noticed a thing. I tugged at her sleeve, but she didn't pay attention.

"Good bye, Mrs. Piotrkowska."

"Good bye, and God be with you," the pious woman answered.

Outside, I couldn't contain myself any longer. As soon as the door closed behind us, I exploded,

"Mother, didn't you see that she had all the things that were missing from our apartment? She also had many things that belonged to other people who had lived in the building. They don't belong to her. You know that."

"Of course I know, sweetheart, but it wouldn't do any good to ask for them. She would only deny that she took

them. There is nothing we can do about it. They don't belong to us anymore."

We walked back in silence. I didn't feel much like talking, in spite of my happiness at having recovered the rest of my books. There was a finality to this visit, something I hadn't felt before today. Somehow I knew that we wouldn't be going back again, ever. It wasn't our home anymore; it was painful, but true. In spite of it, I tried reassuring myself,

"The war will end soon. We will go back, we will," I kept repeating quietly, but deep down I knew I was deluding myself. There wasn't anything to go back to; it wasn't our apartment anymore. We didn't even have the key.

APRIL 1940

The first spring in the ghetto brought no change for the better. Nature was doing its job of regeneration, putting the long winter behind us, but conditions didn't improve. To keep from boredom, I tried to busy myself with different projects, but I missed having friends. There were no girls my age in our building, or in the nearby houses. My days were spent almost exclusively with adults. The only friend I made was a boy who lived in our building, Salek Weitz. The Weitzes lived directly above us. In addition to Salek and his parents, there were two sisters and a brother, Adam, a tall, powerfully built young man who worked as a fireman in the ghetto. Salek's older sister was married; her husband was with the Polish army when the war started. He never came back. Because the Weitzes were regarded as two families, they had the good fortune to get a two-room apartment.

Mrs. Weitz was slim and rather tall, her black hair laced with gray. Her daughters, both in their twenties, were tall, nice-looking young women with thick, dark brown wavy hair. Mr. Weitz, thin and wiry, had been a businessman before the war, but in the ghetto, like most people at the time, he wasn't working yet. Their youngest, Salek, who was my age, was the baby of the family. A thin, serious boy, he was quiet and rather shy. All the Weitzes, except Salek, were very outgoing, with an open, friendly manner. Our families became good friends.

The war made an expert knitter out of me. I still

remember my first knitting effort in the sixth grade. It was a school assignment--we were supposed to knit a scarf. The scarf I produced after a lot of knitting and ripping was in red and white stripes--not because of an excess of patriotic zeal on my part--the Polish flag was red and white, but because my mother happened to have wool in these colors at home. It was made in purl stitch; that was easy enough, but getting the right tension was harder. I couldn't master the technique that would give the scarf a uniform look. In the end, I added a fringe which earned the scarf a passing grade. I never thought that I would knit again.

After the outbreak of the war when it became impossible to buy new sweaters, I decided to give knitting another chance. It was hard to get new wool in the ghetto. I started to use old sweaters, which we no longer wanted, unraveled and washed them, and turned them into balls of almost perfect wool. After a while I became adept at creating interesting patterns and designs in unusual color combinations. One of my favorite sweaters was a brown pullover with short, puffy sleeves. Pink flower buds were knit into the pattern. I had extraordinary luck in making the sweaters fit just right, as I didn't use any instruction books.

Two women who lived in our building in the ghetto, a mother and a daughter, were professional knitters. They were very helpful and would spend time teaching me new stitches and designs. Emboldened by my success I even

offered to knit a pair of overalls for a neighbor's little boy, from an assortment of multi-colored leftover wool. To my great surprise the overalls fit the little boy perfectly. I became an increasingly adventurous knitter, trying my hand at more difficult projects, such as mittens, gloves and socks.

My mother was very impressed with my expertise, as she had never learned to knit. She would remark that I must have inherited the talent for handicrafts from my father, which was probably true. As long as I had sweaters to rip up, knitting occupied my time. It was challenging and it kept me from thinking about the constant hunger that kept my stomach grumbling.

I will be thirteen years old on April 13. This birthday would be very different from my past birthdays; I always had a party for my friends. This year there would be no party. My friends were gone, scattered to unknown places. My parents weren't mentioning my birthday, there were no preparations, yet I knew they wouldn't have forgotten it. In the morning nothing seemed different, but around noon Aunt Gucia came and brought some home-made cookies. Mother made a delicious, thick soup for the four of us. In the afternoon Mrs. Weil and Salek dropped in, bringing me a present, a leather-bound diary. We had ersatz tea and Aunt Gucia's cookies, and Mother presented me with a pair of shoes which she had bought at the "black market." My happiness at the shoes was great; my feet were growing and all my old shoes were getting very tight. Aunt Gucia had a present for me as well, a pretty red purse. It was a nice birthday.

MAY 1940

The Lodz ghetto was permanently sealed on May 1, 1940, its inhabitants cut off from the outside world. Surrounded by fences and barbed wire, it was guarded by SS troops ready to shoot to kill at the slightest provocation. A number of people were killed when they unwittingly behaved in ways that aroused the ire of the German sentries.

In other ghettos it was possible to obtain Aryan papers for money, and try to pass as Aryans. In the Lodz ghetto--Litzmannstadt Ghetto as it was called by the Germans, that was unheard of. We were completely isolated. Some people still listened to clandestine radios, which, if found, would make them subject to severe punishment. The majority of ghetto inhabitants were not getting any news from the outside world. We lived in ignorance. The official ghetto news was delivered through speeches by Rumkowski. The Germans delegated the authority of running the ghetto to him, and he created a network of departments and offices including Jewish police and firemen. Enlisting experts in various fields, he organized many factories in which goods, such as army uniforms and equipment were manufactured for the Germans. To remain in the ghetto, people had to have a job, either in one of the factories or in other ghetto departments. Artisans who had marketable skills, among them tailors, dressmakers, shoemakers and others were employed first, but those who had no skills had to work as well, even school-age children like me. Father was convinced that because his was a luxury trade, he would not be able

to get a job. When we left for the ghetto, Father managed to transport some of his machines and store them in Mr. Farber's factory. After we moved to our own place, Father found it impossible to transfer the heavy machines; they remained in Mr. Farber's factory. He felt lost without them. They were his livelihood; he was brooding, as he had little to do to occupy his time.

He had set up his machine-embroidery workshop when he and Mother got married. Father was a wonderful artist, able to create the designs for his work himself. His many creations crowded my childhood with a world of exotic animals, denizens of jungles and African plains, that included lions, tigers and regal peacocks, their richly-colored feathers gleaming in silk threads. There was an array of flowers as well, some of whose names I didn't know, because they didn't exist. Those were stylized, "futuristic" designs, products of Father's imagination. I thought that Father's designs were all beautiful, but I did have my favorites, the peacock, and the lion--perennial best sellers. Used mostly as wall hangings or throws, these designs were paired with small squares suitable for pillows.

Father got his training in Berlin, in the nineteen twenties and his designs were a source of pride to him. Whenever he executed a new one, he would call on Mother and me to judge it and give him our opinion of his creation.

"What do you think?" he would ask, a trace of a smile on his lips, his horn-rimmed glasses making him look more serious than he was.

In the ghetto, I missed Father's workshop, awash with multicolored silk threads wound up on large cardboard spools. They were arranged on wall shelves according to color. I used to love watching Father prepare some of his special projects, which he would design exclusively for one person, sometimes for a dressmaker, to be used as part of a dress design, or decoration. Father enjoyed training his workers to operate the embroidery machines; he always had a young apprentice eager to learn the trade. But for Father, the most exciting part of his job was designing the patterns. It was fun to watch him create a new design. Sometimes he would get an idea from a photograph or a drawing, but often he would make a sketch from his imagination, correcting it until he was completely satisfied with the results. When the design was finished, he would enlarge it with a special instrument to the desired size. The next step was to transfer the design onto heavy duty paper. Afterwards, he would puncture holes in the paper with a little rotating wheel, so that the design could be transferred to the fabric, usually black felt, with powdered chalk. The last step was for Father to select the appropriate colors and the design was ready to be machine embroidered. Father would always make the sample himself and put it into production.

The ghetto ended all this, and Father was sure he wouldn't get a job in his trade. The only job he was able to get was temporary; he was assisting Mr. Helfgot, the administrator of the buildings on our street. There was a lot to be done; all the people who moved in had to be

registered. Eventually, the job was completed.

Because we were located on the outskirts of the ghetto, where almost all buildings had grassy lawns, tenants were given the opportunity to grow vegetables, if they were willing to tend their own land. Most people enthusiastically agreed. The planting was a success; the vegetables grew nicely. At the end of the summer the seeds yielded many kinds of vegetables, such as radishes, cucumbers, cabbage, potatoes, and carrots. They were a nice addition to our meager diet. Unfortunately, the following summer seeds were no longer distributed, although some of the people continued to plant potatoes, which didn't need seeds; all one had to do was to cut the potato into chunks, making sure that each one had at least one spot which would produce roots, and grow into a plant that would eventually produce potatoes.

Having been city dwellers before the war, my parents weren't knowledgeable about this, but they did what everyone else did, and in time we had potatoes, which were fresh and tasty, and helped to keep our stomach from grumbling.

AUGUST 1940

The war made an expert knitter out of me. I still remember my first knitting effort in the sixth grade, before the war. It was a school assignment--we were supposed to knit a scarf, after only a couple of lessons. The scarf I produced after a lot of knitting and ripping was in red and white stripes--not because of an excess of patriotic zeal on my part--the Polish flag was red and white, but because my mother happened to have wool in these colors at home. It was to be made in purl stitch; that was easy enough, but getting the right tension was harder. I couldn't master the technique that would give the scarf a uniform look. In the end, I added a fringe, which earned the scarf a passing grade. At the time, I never thought that I would want to knit again.

During the war, when it became impossible to buy new sweaters, I decided to give knitting another chance. It was just as hard to get new wool in the ghetto, the supplies seemed to have dried out overnight. Like many other knitters, I had to use old sweaters, which I had to unravel, wash and turn into balls of almost perfect wool. In a short time, I became very adept at creating interesting designs and patterns in unusual color combinations. One of my favorite sweaters was a brown pullover with short, puffy sleeves sprayed with pink flower buds knitted into the pattern.

I must have had extraordinary luck making the sweaters fit just right, because I didn't have any instruction books, only occasional help from two women who lived in our building

in the ghetto, a mother and daughter who were professional knitters. They were extremely helpful and would spend time with me teaching me new stitches and designs. It was their help that gave me the impetus to offer to knit a pair of overalls for a neighbor's little boy, from an assortment of multi-colored leftover wool. To my great surprise the overalls fit the little boy perfectly. Emboldened by my success, I tried more and more difficult patterns. My mother was very impressed with my expertise; she never learned how to knit.

With time I undertook more complicated projects such as mittens, gloves and socks. During the winter, these items would be very important; they would keep us a little warmer. Mother and Father had enough of their pre-war clothes, but I was growing in spite of the war and needed larger clothes. Besides, I enjoyed doing these things; they were challenging and kept me busy evenings.

JANUARY 1941

Nineteen forty one crept in almost unnoticed--the predictions for a quick end of the war belying the reality. There were no new year celebrations. The mood in the ghetto was glum. The foremost thought on everyone's mind was food. Demonstrations greeted bread rationing and the scarcity of other food. Such pre-war dietary staples as eggs and butter or meat were no longer to be had. We had to be satisfied with an occasional ration of margarine. Bread rations were woefully inadequate and were distributed on a weekly basis; most people found it very hard to limit themselves to the small amount allotted for each day. They would eat more the first couple of days, and pay the price of starving the rest of the week. Meat was especially scarce. Rumkowski, the head of the ghetto was blamed for this situation. His speeches, upbeat as he tried to make them, were greeted with jeers and outcries for more food.

The last resource that was left to those who had the money was the black market. While the supplies were not large, it was possible to get some staples, such as bread, potatoes, real tea and occasionally meat and other "luxury" items.

One day, Mother decided to buy some meat on the black market. It was supposed to be beef brisket. She prepared it her usual way, as pot roast. We awaited dinner that day with great anticipation as beef was a rare commodity. When we bit into the meat, we looked at each other--we all had the same reaction--the meat was awful. It had a peculiar,

nauseatingly sweet taste. We tried to eat it; we were very hungry, but as much as we tried, we couldn't force ourselves to swallow it. Mother threw the meat out, a very unusual thing to do when every crumb of food was savored. When she inquired about the meat, she found out that it was horse meat masquerading as beef. At the time we were still not hungry enough to eat horse meat. Later on, we became inured to its taste and welcomed horse meat whenever we could get it.

The shortage of coal and wood with which to heat our rooms created the biggest problem. The small apartment houses in our area were encircled by wooden picket fences. Those were the first to go. The demolition of the fences and distribution of the wood was carried out by a group of men, my father included, so that each family would receive an equal amount. The shed behind our building went next--it yielded quite a lot of wood, which helped us to survive the bitter winter in the ghetto. Winter or not, the need for wood or coal was constant. Without them we could not cook our meals. The occasional coal rations we received helped somewhat, but were not in any way sufficient to keep us from freezing during the brutal winter months. After all other sources were exhausted, people started to chop up furniture. Unfortunately, there wasn't much we could spare--our room held only a few pieces of wooden furniture--the table and chairs were indispensable. The wooden book shelves had to be sacrificed first; the coal bin was chopped up next. As a last resort, the neighborhood people decided to cut down some of the young trees gracing the yards. It was a shame, but

there was no other way.

Sometime that month word got around that a high school would be opening in the spring. Because space would be limited, it would be necessary to take an entrance exam. Salek and I practiced for the exam together, especially honing up on math. We were both notified that we passed the exam and would be entering the first level of high school. We were elated and were looking forward impatiently to the day when school would begin.

APRIL 1941

We will be starting school in April! I could hardly conceal my excitement. It was finally happening. Salek and I made up to walk to school together. Marysin, where the school was located, was actually a suburb, and unlike the rest of the ghetto, it was countrified, with lots of trees, and small, one or two family houses, occupied before the war almost exclusively by Catholic Poles. We had a long walk ahead of us; we started out full of enthusiasm, walking briskly, but an April shower dampened our spirits somewhat. As we neared Marysin, the unpaved walks were muddy and wet, but in spite of it, we were full of anticipation, trying to guess what the school would be like and what subjects we would study, but more importantly, I felt that going to school would instill some meaning to the purposeless existence in the ghetto. I needed the structure that the school would provide. Both Salek and I agreed that we would definitely enjoy going to school, no matter what the subjects turned out to be.

When we finally arrived at the school, Salek and I were instructed to go in different directions. The classes were not coeducational; the boys were in a different building.

The girls' building wasn't too big, but the rooms were spacious, the many windows letting in the light. There were about thirty girls in my class, none of whom I knew. We were told that the first day would be spent meeting our teachers, most of whom had taught in private Jewish secondary schools before the war. We were given the room numbers and told that our first class would be Greek mythology. I immediately fell

in love with the subject and the teacher, who was full of fervor and eager to begin teaching. It was easy to see that Greek mythology was her specialty--even her appearance was classical; she wore a long, black flowing dress, and her short black hair was combed in a straight, classic style. Greek mythology was a new subject for me, I had never even heard of Homer; the teacher explained that he was an important Greek poet who lived in the tenth century before Christ, and wrote the two epic poems which we would be reading. I found that fascinating. Next, the teacher distributed books and told us that our first assignment would be Homer's "Odyssey." "The Iliad" would be next.

The second subject was German, which I had begun learning in the school I had attended previously. But this teacher had neither the enthusiasm nor the charisma of the mythology teacher. He had a stern demeanor--I could tell right away that his class would not be fun. The third class was Latin, taught by a middle-aged woman, who announced that in the beginning we would learn mostly grammar; there would be lots to memorize. Latin became my second favorite subject, after Greek mythology. The grammar, with its declensions and conjugations was similar to Polish grammar, but learning the unfamiliar phrases was like unraveling a puzzle.

At noon, a bell rang for our lunch break. We were directed to a large dining room where we were served a tasty thick soup and a piece of cake. After lunch I decided to take a walk. Although the school itself was small, the grounds were spacious, full of old trees and grassy lawns, where one

could study in good weather. After lunch, we met the teacher of Yiddish, a dapper man with a little beard. He told us that in his class we would focus mostly on Jewish culture. We would learn Yiddish songs and listen to him read stories by famous Yiddish writers. The last class of the day was Hebrew. I already knew the alphabet, but the teacher, a serious young man, said that we would be learning a lot of grammar, as we needed the foundation in order to speak the language.

Salek and I made up to meet after school and walk home together. We both had lots to say. We compared the subjects we had, which were the same, and exchanged our first impressions, describing our teachers to each other. On the whole, we were pleased with nearly all of our teachers and were excited about attending a secondary school in the ghetto. We considered ourselves very lucky to have been selected. The one thing that was unusual, was the lack of science, history or geography in our curriculum, subjects that were usually taught in secondary schools. The reason for this became clear--the Germans didn't want us to learn anything that might impinge on their territorial conquests.

When I returned home, Mother had a present for me--a canvas book bag. I don't know how she managed to get it, but I loved it, especially knowing that she had most likely spent a lot of money for it on the black market. But this was my mother; I could always count on some pleasant surprise from her, even now that money was getting sparse. Father had a lot of questions for me; he was happy that I would be attending school; education was always a high priority to him.

MAY 1941

In the middle of last month an announcement was made by Rumkowski concerning work outside the ghetto. It stressed the advantages of the work program, which would help unemployed men earn a salary. The applicants were supposed to be in excellent physical condition, between eighteen and forty-five years old. Father, who was forty-three, decided to apply. He felt, as many others did, that the war wouldn't last long. This was an opportunity to escape the dreariness of the ghetto. He still believed the Germans were fair and would treat the workers well if they did a good job. Mother was against it, but Father assured her that it wouldn't be for long, that he would be back soon... Just platitudes, I thought, annoyed at him--his place was right here with us.

A man who lived in our building was also going. He was younger than my father and had a wife and three little girls. He was a tough, strong man, who looked like a prizefighter, and unlike my father, was used to hard physical labor.

Several thousand applications were received. A large number were rejected as not fit. I was hoping that my father would be among those, but to my horror I found out he was not. I took Father's impending departure as a personal affront. I kept on doing my usual things--I had just started school and was busy doing homework, but inwardly I was seething with anger. I would talk to Father as little as possible to make him see that I was mad at him. If he noticed, he didn't let on. Several times he tried to talk to me about his departure, trying to reassure me that he

would write as often as he could, and promising that we would be reunited soon. I did not give in--my attitude didn't change one bit--I wanted him to stay with us.

It was hard for Father to believe that the Germans were no longer the same Germans he had encountered in Berlin in the 1920's when he was learning his trade there. His memories of that time were good ones. How could he know that he was dealing with a new, monstrous ideology?

As the day of his departure neared, I was getting more and more upset. The war had wrought havoc with families. Some men left their families and went to the Soviet Union at the beginning of the war to escape the German occupation. I never thought that our family would be torn apart. We were so close before the war--we were almost always together. The war had changed things--this was the second time that Father was leaving us. Why did he have to go?

I refused to accompany my parents to the place of Father's departure. I didn't want to see my father off; I was too angry at him. Only Mother's pleading made me change my mind, but even she couldn't make me talk to Father. I was adamant. There was no way he could convince me that he was doing the right thing.

It was a sunny April morning when the three of us set out for the assigned place. Father carried a small suitcase. He was quiet and subdued. Mother tried to keep a conversation going in a falsely cheerful tone, but Father and I weren't listening, each lost in thought. We arrived at the assembly place early. Clusters of people were there

already, some milling about, others huddling with their families. I couldn't bear it. I had to get out of there.

"Goodbye, Father," I said, and without waiting for his answer, I ran home, not waiting for Mother. Alone in our room, I collapsed on the bed in tears, able at last to vent my feelings. Father's departure was very hard for me to take; I tried hard to justify what he did, but as much as I tried I couldn't come up with a sufficient reason for him to leave us alone and go to a work camp, where the conditions would most likely be as bad or worse than in the ghetto.

When mother came home she tried in vain to calm me, assuring me that we'd hear from Father soon. That assurance came true soon, as promised. We received several postcards from Father and we were able to write to him as well.

Reading Father's letters, Mother and I soon realized that he was writing only what he was permitted to write, always in generalities, praising the conditions and food in the camp and letting us know that he was well. There was never anything personal in his notes, just a few sentences, enough to fill the postcards.

SEPTEMBER 1941

Mother and I were getting used to life without Father. We no longer heard from him and our letters to him were returned unread. Our correspondence had continued for a few months, but eventually it stopped. Sending or receiving mail in the ghetto was no longer permitted.

In the beginning Mother and I managed somehow, but it became more difficult as time went on. I missed Father a lot--I felt his absence all the time. Mother tried to cheer me up, but it was a feeble effort--she didn't succeed. I could see that she wasn't well. She was getting thinner and weaker as time went on. Mother had always been an active and energetic person who was hardly ever sick, but lately, she seemed to have very little energy. She didn't complain, still doing the household chores, preparing our food and cleaning the room and washing our clothes. Most of the time she refused my offers of help.

"No, no, you have schoolwork to do."

But even though she tried to hide it from me, I could see that everything she did was a great effort for her.

The shortage of coal was getting worse. It was almost impossible to manage with the amount allotted. The only other possibility was the black market, where coal or wood were sometimes available. With Father absent, it was now Mother's responsibility to obtain these necessities. We would go to the black market together, but even with my help I could see that it was hard for Mother to carry the heavy load. Even when rationed coal was available, Mother was too

frail to stand in the long lines. We didn't get coal very often.

Lately, I started to insist that Mother let me do some of the household chores. She finally agreed. On my return from school I would ask her what needed to be done. I began to learn many household tasks that I was to do regularly during Mother's illness. Washing the floor was one of the hardest jobs. I had to get down on my hands and knees, a pail of water beside me, and wash the floor with a rag, sometimes even scrubbing it with a brush. I also did some cooking under Mother's tutelage. My help gave her a chance to rest while I prepared the watery soups which were the mainstay of our diet. It was hard to cook up anything nutritious from the rations we were getting. Food was becoming more scarce and people were becoming increasingly despondent as the prospect of a speedy end of the war became more fleeting. Even in the ghetto we heard about German victories in the Soviet Union and other places. People were hungry, people were depressed. Some, driven to despair, attempted, or succeeded in committing suicide.

A real danger for ghetto dwellers was coming in contact with the SS sentries, who would stop people for real or imagined transgressions. Some of these unfortunates were hanged, and their bodies displayed on the specially erected gallows for all of us to see.

I happened to be walking by one of these gallows one time, and witnessed the spectacle. The crimes which prompted the hangings were usually minor, such as walking too close to

the barbed wire at the ghetto perimeters, which would be construed as an attempt to escape, or just displeasing the German sentries in some other way. It was especially dangerous to cross to the other part of the ghetto at Zgierska Street, where the guards always waited for someone to veer a little out of the way to shoot indiscriminately without asking questions.

OCTOBER 1941

Mother collapsed one afternoon while I was in school. When I returned, I found her in bed, watched over by a neighbor, Mrs. Ginsberg. Mother was pale and appeared weak. There was no particular reason for her illness; she went for a walk in the morning and later decided to wash some clothes. She became dizzy and passed out. I was fortunate to get a doctor to come to see Mother the same day. His prognosis was not encouraging.

"You are malnourished," he told her. "It's the ghetto sickness. Unfortunately, the only thing that can cure you you can't get--that is, healthy, nutritious food--eggs, butter, meat..."

He prescribed a medication, but we both knew that it wouldn't do Mother any good. When I was still in school, I would, occasionally, save some of the soup I got for lunch and bring it home for Mother. It wasn't enough. As the doctor had said, what she needed was not available in the ghetto.

To my dismay, school was closing for good. Because of an influx of deportees from German-occupied countries any available space had to be relinquished, so they would have a place to live. There was no choice but to close the school. It had only lasted several months. I will always cherish the time I spent there; the school gave me an illusion of normalcy during this horrid period. It made my squalid existence a little easier to take. When we were told that the school was going to close, most of us cried.

A new phase was starting in the ghetto--all its inhabitants would have to work. Exceptions were made only for the very ill. The ghetto would be allowed to exist because Rumkowski promised the Germans that every person, even children as young as eight would be employed in the factories which were manufacturing products needed by the Germans. I had to get a job, which meant leaving Mother who depended on my help with feeding and other chores, alone for the whole day. I had no choice. I was assigned to a factory not too far from where we lived. Before the war, this small factory specialized in machine-knit garments. Now, the Germans needed soldiers' uniforms and other items for the military, which took first priority. Of lesser importance were goods for German civilians, including dresses and underwear. Rumkowski was able to convince the German ghetto authorities that there were many excellent artisans in the ghetto who would produce anything that the Germans needed.

As I didn't have any skills, my job was to cut stray threads from finished garments. I worked alongside other girls my age. One in particular, Ala, whom I remembered from the high school in the ghetto, became a good friend. We used to talk while we were bent over the rough fabric of the uniforms, engaged in the mindless job of cutting threads. Ala confided in me that she was a communist and belonged to a group of young women who occasionally met to discuss matters that were important to them. At times we talked about books we had read or were reading. It made the time go by faster. We were unaccustomed to the long hours we had

to sit in a cramped place without being able to get up and stretch. Malingering was not tolerated--we were under constant surveillance and were reprimanded if we were caught resting.

The highlight of the day was the watery soup that was distributed at noon. It made the tedious job just a little easier to endure. The lines for the soup were long--we hardly had enough time to gulp down the hot liquid before the bell announced that it was time to go back to work.

Back home after work, I had little time to rest. I had to take care of Mother and prepare and cook our soup, Mother's one hot meal of the day. With the rations of food we were getting consisting mostly of half-rotten vegetables, it wasn't an easy job. I tried to give Mother the thickest part of the soup, but she had no appetite; she didn't care whether she ate or not.

Occasionally, I would try the black market; if I was lucky I would find some real tea at a very inflated price. Mother liked tea, so I tried to get some for her whenever I had the money. Most of our valuables, such as mother's jewelry, watches, even her wedding ring, had long been traded in for food. I was doing what I could, but I was completely helpless--I knew that whatever I did would not do enough to improve Mother's condition.

NOVEMBER 1941

In the late fall, the ghetto experienced a tremendous influx of refugees from German-occupied countries. It was very difficult for these new arrivals to acclimatize themselves to ghetto conditions. As newcomers they were not knowledgeable in the ways of the ghetto. The older people, especially, were fragile and unable to handle the new, unfamiliar place. Like everyone else in the ghetto they would have to work, mostly at menial jobs without knowledge of the languages spoken by the natives, Polish and Yiddish, nor their lifestyles. The inadequate food and the terribly overcrowded housing conditions caused many of the refugees to get sick, especially the older ones, who succumbed to their illnesses.

Transports of Jews from Germany were followed by large transports from Czechoslovakia, Austria and Luxembourg.

There was resentment on both sides--the Lodz Jews resented the newcomers for taking away some of their food and impinging on their woefully inadequate space, while the newcomers expressed their unhappiness at being forced to live in such horrible conditions, with poor sanitary facilities and woefully inadequate food. In our neighborhood room had to be made for some of these newcomers, many of them elderly. I would see them occasionally in the streets, wandering aimlessly, looking disoriented and trying, often in vain, to communicate.

The ghetto also became host to Jews from many small towns in the Lodz area when the time came to render the towns

"Judenrein" (cleansed of Jews). Those people had an easier time adjusting, since they not only spoke and understood the language of the ghetto but shared a cultural heritage as well.

The only way one could make life in the ghetto a little more tolerable was through the use of connections; it sometimes could spell the difference between life and death, to know someone well-placed in the ghetto hierarchy. Time was also a factor, especially for those with particular talents or expertise. The ghetto needed such people--those who knew how to promote themselves would eventually find their way up the ghetto ladder. In the meantime, the ghetto was hard on everyone, and with the ever-increasing shortages of food, people were dying from hunger all the time. Food, the only medicine for hunger was a commodity in short supply.

I continued to struggle between working full time and taking care of Mother. It was a very hard time for me, a time when I no longer had much energy to spare. My job and taking care of Mother was using all of it up. I was becoming depressed with the unending sameness of the days. There were no breaks I could hope for.

JANUARY 1942

Another year was beginning--more days and nights spent in ever-increasing misery. There was nothing to look forward to. Father didn't write anymore. We didn't know if he was alive or dead. Mother was completely bed-ridden, and I found it increasingly harder to balance my work at the factory and the care of Mother in the evening. Mother desperately needed some kind of remedy which I was unable to provide. Medical science in the ghetto was helpless in the face of the many who were dying of hunger.

The few times the doctor came to examine Mother, he just shook his head. There was nothing he could do for her. In the ghetto, she was beyond medical help--she needed food, good, nutritious food that was impossible to get. It hurt me to watch her wither away, day by day. I was tired myself, tired of the unrelieved daily grind, and the responsibilities I faced which were beyond me; tired of our life that was determined for us by fate.

After work I had to stand in long lines to make sure that I wouldn't miss any of the rationed food that was available. Every so often, there would be an announcement that vegetables, such as potatoes or cabbage came in, and could be bought with food rations. One day after work I was in line to buy potatoes which would be sold that day. The line was long and the winter afternoon cold. I stood, waiting for the potatoes to be delivered, agonizing silently over my frozen fingers and toes, my nose hidden in my scarf. When the line started to move, one of the women behind me in line,

looked at me and pointing her finger at me intoned in a loud voice,

"Where did she come from? She wasn't in the line before."

Turning to someone behind her, she asked,

"Did you see this girl? I was here all the time and I didn't see her. She must have sneaked in."

The woman she spoke to, looked at me and shook her head,

"I don't remember her. I didn't see her."

Soon there was a chorus of voices telling me to leave the line.

I was astounded. Numb from the cold and from the terrible hurt of this unjust accusation, I remained silent. I couldn't say anything, because I knew that if I opened my mouth, I would start to cry.

They looked at me, their faces contorted with self-righteous indignation.

"Get out of here! You don't belong in this line! Go away!"

I opened my mouth to defend myself, whispering through my choked-up throat:

"I was here. I was here from the beginning."

But nothing made them believe me. I was pushed out of the line. There was no way I could defend myself. I went home without the potatoes. In answer to Mother's question I said that they had sold out all the potatoes before my turn came. The injustice hurt me more than the hunger. How could

they do this to me? I had no answer. This was the ghetto and people were desperate.

Scanning the bins at home for anything that I could use for tonight's soup, I realized that I had nothing left that I could cook. There were no vegetables, nothing but a little flour and tomorrow's bread ration. I had to go out again and see what I could buy. I headed for the "Black market" some distance from our house. It was a busy area, with many people milling about, buying or selling. Anyone who had something to sell could become a vender, a raggedy group ranging in age from small children to withered old men and women. I surveyed the wares. The potatoes looked bad, half-frozen, oozing a smelly goo. Cabbage was in somewhat better shape. I bought one and splurged on a small amount of barley, enough for tonight's soup. Tomorrow I would get the next week's rations.

That evening I spent more time than usual trying to make Mother comfortable. I washed and combed her hair and sponged down her body. I knew she was thankful, but it was an effort for her to talk now. She just smiled at me and tried to embrace me with her emaciated arms. We both knew that barring a miracle, nothing could make her healthy again in the ghetto. I just hoped that she wasn't suffering too much. She had always been strong--never a complainer. Those qualities remained with her even now. When she finally fell asleep I felt relief, hoping she would get some respite from her suffering. Looking at her resting peacefully, I thought of the way she used to be before the war. I never paid much

attention to the way she looked, but she was a healthy and resilient person. I couldn't recall when she was ever sick during my childhood years. She led an active life and was happy and energetic. In less than two years she became transformed from a young, vigorous person to an aged, frail invalid. It was tragic. Why would anyone want to inflict such suffering on other human beings?

AUGUST 1942

I woke up with a start. A sound unlike anything I have ever heard, penetrated the stillness of the night. An urgent, animal-like voice, uttering strange, unfamiliar phrases over and over again. I tried to concentrate, but I couldn't make out the words. Slowly I opened my eyes. The room was completely dark; blackout orders. I lay still, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness. The sound continued. Still half asleep, I lifted my head. It had to be Mother, but this wasn't Mother's voice--it was so thick and weird.

"Mother," I whispered, "what is it?"

She didn't answer, but the low, gurgling noises persisted.

"Mother," I repeated, loudly this time. "Answer me!"

There was no answer. I reached to the adjoining bed and shook Mother's arm. A loud moan punctuated the even, staccato sounds. I got up, groping my way to the other side of the twin beds, and found Mother's body in the dark. I shook her again.

"Mother, wake up. Are you having a bad dream?"

No response, only the same scrambled words again and again. I bent over, trying to understand what she was saying.

"My legs... my legs... in the fifth bed... bring my legs back... so far away... legs... heavy..."

I stood in front of the bed not knowing what to do. I realized that something was terribly wrong, that she couldn't hear me at all.

"It's all right, Mother, your legs are right here.
Are they hurting you?"

There was no response, but Mother's breathing became quieter, more even. Could she have had a bad dream? There was nothing I could do in the middle of the night--we had a curfew in the ghetto. Going outside after dark was strictly forbidden. I returned to bed. Mother was quiet now, her breathing more regular. She must have had a nightmare, I told myself, relieved. I wanted to stay up, but I found myself drifting into an uneasy slumber.

I must have fallen asleep. It was dawn now, the sun trying to make its way into the darkened room through the window, still covered by the heavy blanket. Mother had not moved. She was lying motionless, her eyes open, her breath coming in short, noisy gasps.

"Mother," I said loudly, "can you hear me?"

There was no sign of recognition in her eyes; they stared unseeingly. Only her breath rattled gently as though a wind was swaying it back and forth.

"Mother, say something!"

Nothing but the laborious rattle of her breath.

Suddenly I knew that Mother was dying. I had to get a doctor. Where should I go? Who would make a house-call so early in the morning? The doctor who occasionally came to see Mother, lived far away. It would take too long for me to get him. I must find a doctor who would come. A doctor who lived nearby. I tried to calm down, gathering my thoughts. It finally came to me; there was someone who would come. I

went to school last year with a girl whose father was a doctor. They lived only a few streets away. I must get him.

Quickly, I slipped into a dress and ran out of the house taking a shortcut through the fenceless lawns. The wooden fences have long ago been used for firewood. Soon I was at the doctor's door. Still out of breath, I knocked at the door. A dark-haired woman of about fifty opened the door a crack.

"The doctor, please. I need a doctor. My mother is very sick. Please, let me speak to the doctor,"

I spilled out the words, afraid that she will slam the door in my face. She looked me over, hesitating a moment.

"Wait a minute, I'll call him," she said, and closed the door leaving me at the doorstep. A few minutes later the door opened and the doctor appeared, napkin in hand; a small dark man with a little graying beard. He seemed faintly annoyed, he must have been eating his breakfast.

"What is it you want?"

"My Mother is very sick. Please come with me. She needs a doctor."

"Have you money?"

"Yes," I said impatiently. "Come, please!"

He stretched his hand out.

"Let me have it."

"I have it at home. I will give you the money when we get there."

I was almost crying, tears welling up in my eyes.

"Bring the money, child," he said slowly, without a

hint of emotion.

I looked at him in disbelief.

"But there isn't time. My mother is dying."

"I don't make house calls these days before I am paid. Just bring the money and I'll go with you."

I looked into his eyes and saw in their dark blue coldness, that he meant what he said. There was no sense pleading. Without another word, I turned around and ran back to the house. I entered the room and went over to the bed.

"Mother?" I said loudly. "I'm back."

Not a sign of recognition, only the rasping sound of her breath. I opened a drawer and took out several bills. This would be enough. Without another look, I closed the door and ran back to the doctor's house. My knock this time was answered by his daughter, my onetime classmate.

"Hi," she said stiffly.

I didn't bother to answer.

"The doctor, please. I have the money here."

I showed her the bills, still breathless from the exertion.

"Wait a minute, I'll get him."

Turning around, she called into the darkness of the hall.

"Father, the girl is here. She has the money."

I heard his muffled answer,

"Tell her to wait, I'll be right there."

I waited outside, the few minutes turning into an eternity. Soon he appeared, carrying a little black bag.

"Let me have the money," he demanded.

"Here. Let's hurry."

"All right, now. Lead the way," he said, pocketing the bills. We walked quickly through the shortcuts, not talking; I, silently repeating to myself,

"Let's get there in time. Let her be all right. Please, God, let her be all right."

We were at the door. I unlocked it and let the doctor go ahead of me. He walked over to the bed and lifted Mother's arm to feel for the pulse. After a couple of minutes he put her arm down and said to me, matter-of-factly,

"She is dead. There is nothing I can do."

Without another word he turned away and left the room.

I sat down, stunned. I couldn't believe it. I looked at Mother. She looked as though she was sleeping peacefully. I bent over and kissed her forehead. I couldn't cry.

Was it really possible that Mother was dead? What should I do? Everyone was at work now. I would have to wait till the evening if I wanted to notify at least her sister, Aunt Gucia, but I wouldn't be able to do it before the curfew. I would have to ask the Weitzes for help; I was confident that they would think of something. I had to wait till they come home from work. Maybe they could help me send word to Aunt Gucia. She would surely want to come to the funeral.

A funeral in the ghetto wasn't a big deal--people died all the time; the hearse-pullers were having a hard time picking up all the corpses. There weren't enough hearses. No one but a spouse and children were allowed to follow the

hearse to the cemetery. I sat, waiting for them to arrive, hoping Aunt Gucia would be notified in time. Adam Weitz promised to send a message to her at her place of work.

It was raining hard now, the grayness of the day befitting my mood. In the late afternoon Aunt Gucia arrived. Adam kept his promise--he managed to notify Aunt Gucia of Mother's death with the help of a ghetto policeman he knew. My aunt came straight from work. She gave me a quick hug and sat down next to me. We sat still, not talking. She didn't offer to take me home with her after the funeral. I understood. In the ghetto the old rules of conduct didn't apply; one had to acquire a new set of rules, which went something like this, "Do what you can. If you can't, God will forgive you. It's no fault of yours."

Finally the hearse arrived--an open wooden wagon pulled by two men. They quickly wrapped Mother's body in a heavy dark cloth and carried it out to the wagon. Aunt Gucia and I followed.

"Don't go to the cemetery," one of the men said, "You won't make it back before the curfew. A funeral is no excuse for being out after dark."

And so we stayed. After a while, Aunt Gucia got up. She had to leave, she said. It would be getting dark soon and she had a long walk ahead of her.

I remained alone, feeling helpless, many emotions invading my consciousness. I couldn't imagine surviving the war on my own--I was too young, too vulnerable. Mother, even during her illness was a comforting presence. Now that she

was gone, the future was too grim to contemplate. Sitting there, despondent, I wanted to forget the present. I had to turn to the past for solace--to return to the comforting womb of childhood memories. I tried hard to recollect something pleasant from the past, but I couldn't. All I could see before me was Mother's dead body. I sat for a while aching with pain but unable to cry. Gradually, weariness took over; my tense body seemed to relax. In the twilight, I saw Mother standing in front of me. It wasn't Mother the way she looked during her final illness; she looked young and vital. I tried hard to understand what was happening, but Mother put her finger to her mouth, motioning me to be quiet. I sat, looking at her, trying to memorize what she looked like; she wasn't beautiful in the ordinary sense. She had regular features, brown hair and brown eyes. But there was a warmth that she exuded, that I recalled from my childhood. There was a gentleness, too. She was truly a good person, never demanding, but always willing to give.

A knock on the door startled me. I guess I must have dozed off. I shook myself awake and opened the door. It was Mrs. Weitz. She asked me to come upstairs with her and share dinner with her family. I thanked her--I was grateful for her offer, but I was too tired. I couldn't face that many people tonight. Mrs. Weil left, promising to come right back. She returned with a bowl of hot soup. I devoured it hungrily. I haven't eaten all day. Undressing quickly, I fell exhausted onto the bed, hoping to fall asleep. But sleep wouldn't come. My grief was keeping me awake.

SEPTEMBER 1942

The head of the ghetto, Mordehai Chaim Rumkowski made a speech yesterday:

"A grievous blow struck the ghetto. They are asking us to give up the best we possess--the children and the elderly... I gave the best years of my life to children... In my old age I must stretch out my hands and beg: brothers and sisters, hand them over to me! Fathers and mothers, give me your children!"

Twenty thousand people would be taken from the ghetto. Total panic reigned. There was no place to hide. The selection was to take place just a week after Mother's death. The sick, the aged and the young children who until now managed to escape deportation, would be sent to an almost certain death. Only the fittest, those who could meet the rigid standards set by the Nazis would be spared.

On the day of the selection I got up feeling empty inside. I didn't much care what would happen to me; without Mother I had no desire to live. In a way, I was relieved that Mother was dead; in her condition she would certainly have faced deportation. At least she had been spared that.

I sat down at the window, waiting to get this ordeal behind me. I looked at the sun-drenched room where I had spent the last two and a half years. It wasn't much,

1. Alan Adelson and Robert Lapidés, eds and compilers:
Lodz Ghetto, Inside a Community Under Siege. New York,
Viking Penguin, 1989.

but this was the last remnant of a family life before it was extinguished with Mother's death.

The early autumn day was sunny and pleasant, not a thing disturbing the almost idyllic quiet of the morning. The trees in front of the window were still green, their leaves fluttering lightly in the breeze, while birds, unencumbered by racial restrictions, were carousing to and fro. But we were chosen for extinction.

There had been deportations before, but nothing of this magnitude. In the past, the deportations were mostly handled by the Jews. This time the Germans would be making the selection themselves, assisted by Jewish police and firemen. There were several older people and a few children in our building. What would become of them, I wondered.

It was quiet, too quiet. Suddenly, the courtyard came alive with the stomping of boots, and the stillness of a moment ago was pierced by loud commands barked in guttural voices:

"Achtung! Alles aus! Raus, schnell!" (Attention! All out! Out, quickly!)

Leaving the door open, as instructed, I walked outside. Soon the yard was full of people, pale and somber, families clinging to each other, the few children held tightly in their mothers' arms. I looked at the familiar faces as though to imprint their images in my mind. I was strangely calm; I moved as if in a dream.

On orders from the Germans we lined up and proceeded to the designated place, escorted by Jewish policemen. Once

there, we were told to stop in a rectangular area, where we were joined by people from other buildings. SS officers kept milling about, their shiny boots glistening in the sun. Big, heavy, German army trucks were lined up on one side. It was quiet except for the loud commands shouted at us in German by the SS officers and repeated by the Jewish policemen in Polish. We were to form a single line, facing the SS officer--the selection process was about to begin.

As the officer scanned the people in front of him, he moved slowly from one person to the next, motioning those selected for deportation with his riding crop, followed by a curt command,

"Heraus." (Out.)

The tension was palpable. There was no resistance, a faint outcry occasionally, that was all. The line in front of me was getting smaller. In spite of my former indifference, I was shaking. The SS officer was in front of me, looking at me, scrutinizing me. I thought he was moving on and shifted slightly, but he was not finished with me. He looked at me again.

"Aus," he hissed.

"Aus?" I repeated to myself with incredulity, the significance of the little word penetrating my whole being. Why me? I thought feverishly. I am not sick or old. I am fifteen years old and I am working. I don't belong with the old and sick people!

Panic overcame me. Desperately, I wanted to live--to remain in the ghetto--yet I knew that there was no way out.

I walked blindly toward the truck, escorted by a Jewish policeman. Only a miracle could change my fate, but even at fifteen I didn't believe in miracles. But there it was, a miracle in the form of Adam, my upstairs neighbor, brother of my friend Salek, whose family had given me support when my mother died. Adam was a fireman, and he was here, helping people onto the truck.

"Adam," I whispered.

Without hesitation, he grabbed my arm. "Come, quick," he he said quietly.

He led me toward the line of people still waiting to be inspected and pushed me into a space between two people.

"Stay here."

He disappeared before I had a chance to thank him. I realized that I had to face the same officer once more. What if he recognized me? It was dangerous, but I had nothing to lose. With a new determination, I told myself, "I must make it. I don't want to die."

I stretched my skinny frame as tall as I could, and forced the contours of my face into a smile. The line in front of me was getting smaller.

The officer was approaching. I tried to relax, but I was trembling. He was looking at me now. I met his steely glance with a steady eye, a faint smile glued to my lips. I could hear my heart pounding as I searched his face for a sign of recognition.

Nothing. What seemed like an eternity was finally over. He moved on. I was safe, at least for now. Relaxing

my tense shoulders I took a deep breath. I was back with the living.

The sun was still shining as those remaining slowly walked back to their houses. Many cried softly as they walked. All the children were gone, as were the sick and the elderly. For those who remained, another hurdle was overcome. For how long, nobody knew.

The ordeal of the selection changed my attitude--I was determined to stay alive. I had to do it for my mother's sake, so her death and the deaths of all the others would not go unnoticed.

OCTOBER 1942

I was awakened by noises, female voices, a lilting melody rising above the din.

"Ramonaaaa..."

Where were the voices coming from? I opened my eyes and tried to lift my head up, but I felt dizzy. In the dim light of the room I could see outlines of several women. Three. No, four. Who were they?

One of the women came over to my bed. She touched my brow. I was cold, but my forehead was wet with perspiration.

"Who are you?" I asked weakly.

"I am Mrs. Belski. Don't you remember me?"

"Where am I? Where is my mother?"

"You are at home. Your mother died just before the selection," she answered patiently, as if speaking to a small child. "You were sick. You had high fever. I've been looking after you."

"But I don't remember you. Who are they?" I asked, pointing to the women in the background.

"They are my daughters, Miriam, Ruta and Rachel, my youngest. Don't you remember meeting them?"

I looked around the room. Slowly, the shapes of the girls became clearer, two of them near the stove, the third one on the bed. Yes, it was my room, the room I had shared with Mother until her death. But it looked so different now. My bed, which used to be next to Mother's along the window, was now in a corner. There was another,

larger bed on the other side. It was all coming back to me now--a few days after my mother's death there was a selection in the ghetto. All the old people, the sick and the small children were deported. Mr. Helfgott, the building administrator, came into the room and announced,

"You cannot keep the room all to yourself, now that your mother is dead. These are the Belskis. They are a nice family. I know them."

How upset I was at the time, intimidated by the loud, tough-looking young women and their small, wiry mother, with thin, birdlike features and gray hair worn in a braided bun. How could I defend myself against them? I wanted to say something to Mr. Helfgott, to protest, to tell him that it wasn't fair, that this was my room, but the words didn't come out.

The Belskis immediately took over. They began to move furniture, as though it belonged to them, without any regard for me. They emptied drawers, dumping my and my mother's things on the bed which they had designated for me and moved to the corner of the room. To my feeble protests they replied that they needed space also, that I had to share.

Miriam and Ruta appeared to be in their twenties, Rachel about my age or a little older. They all had dark, curly hair falling down their backs in thick ringlets. Three pretty girls, their brown eyes and olive-hued skin making them appear Mediterranean; their sturdy bodies indicating that they must have escaped the food deprivation that we had been suffering for a long time already.

When I asked where she was from, Rachel told me that they have been transported to the Lodz ghetto from a small town nearby, and had to leave everything but a few suitcases with clothes behind.

A delicious smell permeated the room. All of a sudden, I felt ravenously hungry. I lifted my head just as Mrs. Belski put a plate of steaming soup on the chair next to my bed.

"Here, eat." We took your food ration last week, so you can eat with us today, but tomorrow you'll have to cook your own, now that you are better."

What about the food I didn't eat last week, I thought to myself, but I didn't say anything. I didn't want to get into arguments. I still felt too weak for that.

The soup tasted divine. There were chunks of potatoes and cabbage, as well as other vegetables I couldn't make out. The broth was thickened with flour, just the way I liked it. How was it possible to make such a good soup from our meager rations? I decided that it must be because there was strength in numbers. It was easier to concoct something good if one had five rations instead of one. I got a slice of bread also, but all too soon I was finished and still hungry. I knew that I could not expect seconds. Mrs. Belski brought me a glass of imitation tea. It was hot and I savored every bit of it, though it was probably made from dehydrated carrots, like most tea in the ghetto. When I was finished, I felt stronger.

After dinner the clamor began. Loud arguments about

who was supposed to wash the dishes, erupted. Mrs. Belski's high-pitched voice rose above the din, giving orders that were countermanded by the girls. Each one had an excuse for not doing the cleaning--one had laundry to do, the other had to wash her hair and the third had a headache. Mrs. Belski started doing the dishes in the end, muttering about bad, disrespectful children and how they took advantage of her.

"Shut up, Mother," the oldest, Miriam, interrupted her mother's litany. "We've heard all this before."

Mrs. Belski fell silent. I felt like an intruder. Those girls didn't know how lucky they were to have a mother. A pang of sorrow overcame me and the realization that my mother was gone forever hit me with great force. Until now, the finality of mother's death somehow had escaped me. The thought of staying here with these loud and obnoxious strangers was repugnant to me. I have to talk to Aunt Gucia, I thought to myself. Maybe she would take me in; she and Uncle Aron have a large enough room. Pacified, I drifted off to sleep.

The next day was Sunday, a day of rest for many working people in the ghetto. I was sleeping, but the sound of loud voices woke me up. The girls were carrying on a conversation, oblivious to the early hour. I got out of bed and spent the morning making myself as inconspicuous as I could. I picked up a book and tried to read but couldn't concentrate. I was hoping that Aunt Gucia would come to see me. I would have to impress upon her my unhappiness about living with the Belskis. I silently started to prepare

what I would tell her, but before I had a chance to finish, Aunt Gucia appeared at the door. She looked around and without any preliminaries, said to me,

"Pack your clothes and whatever else we can take with us. You are coming with me. I talked it over with Uncle Aron. We will manage somehow."

I did my best to hold back my tears.

"Thank you, Aunt Gucia."

Without wasting any time I gathered up my clothes, some dishes and a few books.

They could keep the rest. I said goodbye to Mrs. Belski and her daughters and I left the room following Aunt Gucia. For better or worse, another chapter of my life had come to an end.

NOVEMBER 1942

Uncle Aron had been an accountant before the war and the Hermans had lived very comfortably. Their daughter, Bela, had attended an expensive private school which focused on the Zionist dream--the attainment of the state of Israel. Uncle Aron, always a serious man, became withdrawn after the death of his only daughter, and suffered from ulcers. When the ghetto was first being formed, Uncle Aron became head of one of the official ghetto food stores, called cooperatives, where food rations were distributed to ghetto inhabitants in exchange for food stamps. There were only a few of these stores in the ghetto, and to get the coveted job of a store administrator was not a simple matter. In addition to qualifications, one needed a lot of connections in high places. My aunt never spoke about how Uncle Aron got his job, but it was certainly a good job to have. Uncle Aron worked long hours, and when he came home in the evening, he would eat his dinner and retreat to bed.

The Hermans had moved from their cheerful little apartment in the heart of the ghetto to one which was closer to their workplaces. It was almost impossible to change one's living quarters. The Herman's new place was not as large as their first ghetto apartment, but it was located in a quiet, residential section, previously occupied by Aryans.

Their space consisted of one large room and a small anteroom, which must have served as a kitchen to the previous tenants. Because it was impossible to heat two rooms with the coal supplies we were receiving, Aunt Gucia did all her

cooking on a pot-bellied stove in the large room, using the small room for storage only.

Aunt and Uncle made space for my bed along one of the walls. When I got there with Aunt Gucia, the bed was already made up, with clean sheets and pillowcases. Aunt and Uncle's two single beds were lined up against the opposite wall. In the center of the room was a table and three chairs. A large wardrobe occupied another wall. The pot-bellied stove and a small work table completed the room's furniture.

Aunt Gucia informed me right away that I would have to cook my own meals. She would prepare a large pot of soup for herself and Uncle once a week on her day off from work, and store it in the cold anteroom, reheating a portion for each evening meal. Uncle Aron would bring some extra food from the food cooperative where he worked. I couldn't help noticing Aunt Gucia putting away small bundles of groceries from time to time, but nothing was ever said about it.

Although my aunt and uncle seldom complained, I could see that they were both in poor health. Still, Aunt Gucia had remarkable stamina for a person in her mid-fifties. For the first time in her life she was working outside her home, in a rug factory, sorting old rags which were later used for the manufacture of rugs. She would often talk about her job and "the ladies" she worked with. Uncle Aron never spoke about his job and seldom took part in the after dinner conversations.

In spite of the tremendous gratitude I felt to my Aunt

and Uncle for having taken me in, living with them wasn't easy for me. They were still grieving for their daughter, Bela, and were in a somber mood most of the time, especially Uncle Aron. I am sure that he felt responsible for her death.

On the rare occasions when I wanted to get together with friends after dinner, Aunt Gucia would admonish me that this wasn't a time for socializing,

"There is a war on. You must not spend time on trivial things."

Instead, she would find things for me to do, mending worn towels and sheets, making sure I did my laundry and other chores. I felt stifled; she was denying me the right to be young. The friends I wanted to see after work were serious young people. They considered themselves communists and held clandestine meetings occasionally to discuss matters of great importance to them. When I was invited to one of their meetings, I decided to go, despite Aunt's protests.

The meeting was held in my friend, Ala's house. On my arrival, the room, which she shared with her mother, was full of girls, some as young as I, some older. Ala still worked in the factory where we had met, but we no longer worked in the same department. Ala was a pretty girl, with a shock of black curly hair and mischievous black eyes. In spite of her appearance, she was serious and dedicated to her cause.

After the meeting was called to order, Ala addressed the gathering with some forceful statements,

"Comrades, we must act now. Even though we are in the

ghetto, we must be aware of what is going on in the world. We must band together.. We know that the USSR will defeat the Germans in the end. We have to prepare for their coming. We will continue our meetings--we are sisters and we must look out for each other. We have to forsake all others for our cause. We all know how scarce food is; we are all suffering from hunger. Yet, we must do all we can to save our comrades. They must survive the war in order to join the communist movement in the USSR. I will ask you a question. Suppose you could save one person, and you had a choice to save either your mother or your comrade, whom would you save?"

"My comrade," chorused all present, to my utter amazement.

"Yes, your comrade, my friends. Your comrade is more important to the movement than your mother, and therefore you have made the right choice."

There was applause after Ala's speech, but my mind was made up. The idea that one must sacrifice one's mother to a cause was unacceptable to me, even though I had no mother to sacrifice any longer. I couldn't believe that these radical ideas came from Ala, the happy-go-lucky girl with whom I had held long conversations about books we were reading; the clever, intelligent Ala, whose mother was right there in the room with us, and had listened to her speech.

On my return home that evening I was greeted by an icy stare from Aunt Gucia. I didn't feel like talking, anyway. I wanted to be alone to digest everything I heard at the meeting. One thing I knew for sure--I wasn't going back to

any of Ala's meetings again. I thought about my mother and the way she was before she became ill; loving and gentle and always there when I needed her. Mother's childhood friend, Asna, had once told me,

"Your mother is a Jerusalem dove."

When she had said it, I didn't quite know what Asna meant, but now I did. Mother was like the dove in the Hebrew song she used to sing to me; gentle but resilient. That was the way I wanted to remember my mother.

After my experience with the communists, I stopped going out after work, spending my evenings reading or helping Aunt Gucia with her mending. The days were getting short and cold; it was better to stay indoors. I still liked to talk to Ala at work, occasionally, when we would meet during our lunch break, but if she wanted to talk about communism, I would change the topic. The next time Ala invited me to attend one of the meetings, I found an excuse.

"My aunt and uncle are opposed to my going out after work," I told her. "Since they are now my guardians, I must respect their wishes."

After that, Ala stopped asking me.

DECEMBER 1942

Mother's death had changed my life. Even in the final stages of her illness, she wasn't difficult to take care of. She would spend her days alone, dozing on and off, unable to get off the bed, her only nourishment the liquids and a piece of bread that I would leave for her in the morning. She was waiting for me when I came back from work, undemanding and patient. She accepted her illness knowing that there was no cure for her in the ghetto. When she first became ill, she tried to prepare me; she started to talk to me about the possibility of her death. I wouldn't let her finish. I covered my ears with my hands I screamed at her,

"Stop, stop! I don't want to hear it!

She never mentioned anything about dying to me again. Her illness was beyond my experience. Constantly vigilant, I worried about her a lot and did all I was capable of to make her more comfortable; it was not within my power to make her well.

Now that I was living with the Hermans, I found that Aunt Gucia was no substitute for my mother. Her maternal instincts must have been extinguished with the tragic death of her daughter. She treated me like an adult, without an iota of tenderness or affection. The same was true of Uncle Aron. It was very kind of them to take me in after Mother's death, and I will never forget it. They were good, decent people, but their grief was overwhelming--it was their most powerful emotion.

Shortly after I moved in with the Hermans, I started to

work nights. The job was a promotion of sorts, even though I had to give up my night's sleep. It was considered a special job. I had no idea who recommended me for it. I had no connections in the factory where I worked, and didn't think that anyone was even aware of me, let alone had wanted to help me. If someone was looking out for me, I didn't know who or why. I suspected that it was the foreman of the floor where I worked, who had recommended me, because it was he who took me to Mr. Zbar's office.

Mr. Zbar, the head of the factory, came right to the point,

"I was told that your mother died recently, and you are all alone," he said. "I would like to recommend you for a more responsible job. You would work as a presser, doing the last operation on a garment before it is shipped to Germany. This is a special project; there will be frequent inspections by German officers. Also, you will be working nights, but your hours will be shorter than the day hours. You are young, but I think that you could handle this job. What do you think?"

"I think I could," I managed to say, overwhelmed by the offer.

Mr. Zbar shook my hand.

"Good luck," he said and walked me to the door.

Men's dress shirts had just started to be manufactured in our factory. They had to be ironed and folded with meticulous precision. We were given special cardboards which were used as guides, so that each shirt would be folded exactly like the others. These were white shirts, and if we

weren't careful, we were told, we could burn or stain them. This had to be avoided at all cost.

There were only six of us, all women, all young. I was the youngest of the group. Soon an easy camaraderie developed among us and we started to talk to each other while we were ironing. Standing all night would get tiresome after a while; the conversation made it easier to bear it.

One girl in particular was always full of stories. Her name was Maryla. A big, healthy-looking girl, Maryla was outgoing and had a great sense of humor. Her brother was a ghetto policeman and he supplied her with many tidbits about his job, which she was eager to share with us. They were mostly about petty crimes committed out of hunger and desperation. Most of the stories were sad, but occasionally there was a glint of humor, as in the story where a woman who appeared to be in the last stages of pregnancy was begging on a street corner, appealing for alms in the name of her unborn child. One day, a policeman appeared on the scene. Frightened, she started to run, and as she was running, the rags that she stuffed her midriff with, started to loosen and fall to the ground, revealing her thin, emaciated figure.

From time to time, the foreman would look in to inspect our work, sometimes accompanied by SS officers. They didn't complain; they were usually satisfied with our work. We were good workers.

Because of the curfew, a special permit was required to be in the streets after dark. I walked to work and back through the deserted streets, but nobody ever stopped me to

check my permit in the few months I worked nights. It was an eerie feeling to be the only person in the complete darkness. Not one light was ever visible in any windows. The city looked dead--uninhabited. Sometimes the full moon lit my way and cheered me up with its distant smile. I walked briskly, because it was cold, but oddly, I wasn't afraid. I knew that I was in the streets for a legitimate reason and had a permit to prove it. It was an optimistic point of view; fortunately, I was never stopped.

By the time I got home from work my aunt and uncle were leaving for their jobs. I usually went to sleep for a few hours and awoke in the early afternoon, famished and ready to eat. But first, I had to prepare my meager vegetables and cook my soup. Often it was hard for me to put together a decent soup with what I had. One day, after having to discard most of the oozing, rotten potatoes that I had, my eyes fell on the large pot of soup that Aunt Gucia had cooked for the week. I was terribly hungry. My soup, when ready, would consist of water and a couple of half-rotten potatoes. A sudden desire to taste Aunt Gucia's soup overcame me. I lifted the lid. The cold soup was jelled into a thick, gray mass. Before getting going any further, I lost the nerve to do it. I closed the lid, peeled my soggy potatoes and put them into a pot. But hunger won. I couldn't stop thinking about the thick soup. I took a spoon out of the drawer and filled it with the cold soup. I put it in my mouth. The soup was very tasty. I took another spoonful and another one. To my amazement, the indentations

from the spoon remained in the soup. I panicked. What if my aunt would notice what I had done? I felt ashamed. Quickly, I evened out the surface as best I could. It looked almost as it had before I disturbed it.

I never found out if Aunt Gucia had noticed anything. If she did, she never mentioned it to me.

FEBRUARY 1943

My night job lasted till the end of February. The job was finished and all of us were transferred to a different department where they manufactured military equipment. It was a regular day job. I had only worked there for about two weeks when I heard that a school was being opened in our factory for girls my age who would be trained in dressmaking and designing skills. After I expressed an interest in the school, I was told that I would be eligible to apply. Mr. Zbar, the head of the factory, was interviewing the applicants himself. I was again summoned to his office. He proceeded to tell me about the school. He explained that all of the girls to be chosen for "The Little School" must have had at least one year of high school. They should be approximately fifteen to sixteen years old, and preference would be given to those who had attended the high school in Marysin. He let me know that I was one of those selected to attend the school. He wanted to know if I would be interested.

Would I be interested! I could hardly conceal my excitement.

"I would be very happy to attend the school, Mr. Zbar."

"Good. The school is opening next Monday. My secretary will tell you where it's located."

I couldn't believe my luck. Aunt Gucia, who hadn't liked the idea of my working nights, was genuinely pleased. Even Uncle Aron seemed to approve in his laconic way.

On Monday morning I showed up in the newly fixed-up

"Little School." It had little in common with the rest of the factory except for the long cutting tables and a roomful of sewing machines. There were several pleasant rooms, some of them equipped with blackboards. Teenage girls were milling about inspecting the place. I soon found at least two girls I knew from the school in Marysin. The group of about fifty girls was divided into two groups, the first and second class. I was put into the second, a more advanced class.

The director of the school, Mrs. Celia Marks, came in and introduced herself. Afterwards, she made a little speech,

"You will be learning to use the sewing machines, and, in addition, you will be learning pattern-making, embroidery, putting finishing touches on a garment by hand, sewing on buttons, hemming and so on. You will also have two regular school classes, Jewish literature and beginning algebra."

Mrs. Marks then pointed out the instructors, all of whom were female, except for two men who would be teaching algebra and Jewish literature. Both used to teach in a private Jewish high school before the war.

I itched to start doing things, but the first day was reserved for introductions. In the afternoon, we had a story read to us in the original Yiddish by the teacher, Mr. Reich. It was a story by one of the foremost Jewish writers, Sholem Aleichem, a pen name--the words are a Hebrew greeting. I was not familiar with Jewish writers, but the story was very good, funny and bittersweet at the same time. It was a good introduction to Yiddish literature.

Being in "The Little School brought back memories. As

a child, I showed a flair for arts and crafts. I would design and sew elaborate clothes for my dolls to the delight of my mother. Grownups who saw the clothes predicted that I would some day be a dress designer. I didn't take designing seriously. It was only one of the many things that interested me at the time.

My clothes and Mother's were always made to order by a dressmaker; ready-made clothes were not very popular. I used to choose the styles I wanted, from the journals the dressmaker would show me. Mother rarely interfered; she liked my taste. I still remember my favorite childhood dress--Shirley Temple had worn it in a movie. It was a princess-style dress, in raspberry-red fabric, form-fitted through the waist and flaired below. It had pink piping running down the center of the dress and was embroidered on both sides with what looked like acacia leaves. I fell instantly in love with it, and wanted one just like it. I had seen a picture of Shirley Temple wearing that dress in a film magazine. I showed the picture to Father, who agreed to do the appliqués. Our dressmaker said she would be able to copy the dress. The fabric Mother and I chose was a lightweight wool in dark blue. The appliqués and the piping would remain in pink satin. When the dress was finished it was beautiful--just like Shirley Temple's. I wore it to my first (and only) school dance.

"The Little School" was very good for me. My days were filled with learning new things; I was mastering the use of the sewing machine, making patterns and designing a

skirt and a blouse. We also started a group project--it was to be a wall hanging depicting scenes from the ghetto, embroidered in small squares which we would later sew together to form a large collage.

While I was in "The Little School," I would forget how awful the ghetto really was. Stepping out to the street, misery and pain were visible everywhere--little children begging in the streets, adults sprawled out on the sidewalk, taking their last breath. I was thankful for being healthy enough to be able to withstand the daily hardships we had to suffer just to remain alive.

JUNE 1943

I first met Mila when I was behind her in line for lunch at the factory where we worked. A diminutive figure in heavy mourning, she wore a long black cardigan, black dress, stockings and shoes, her chestnut hair cascading down her back. She turned around and her clothes struck me as incongruous in relation to her young face--black gentle eyes veiled in dark lashes--eyes as trusting as a doe's. Her face was solemn, unsmiling. We started to talk, her voice fitting her image, gentle and warm, yet surprisingly firm; self-assured. She told me that both her parents had died within a short period of each other a few months ago, and she was left with a younger brother, Janek. They had recently been adopted by the head of the ghetto, Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, and lived with several other teenagers in a large, comfortable house in a countrified section of the ghetto, known as Marysin. The inhabitants of the house, who were Aryan, were resettled to another place.

"We have lots of room there. A playroom, a dining room and bedrooms which only two kids share. We have a cook and a handyman, and there is a woman who supervises the household and takes care of us. We don't live with Rumkowski."

A cook and a handyman? Was she seriously talking about the ghetto as I knew it, or was it all a figment of her imagination? I listened to Mila's tale with fascination and awe, afraid to interrupt so as not to break the spell of this fabulous tale. But Mila was serious, I thought to

myself. She wouldn't make it all up. I shook my head in disbelief,

"You sure are lucky."

"Yes, we are," she said, and a small smile appeared on her face for the first time, making her look like the teenager that she was. Just then the bell rang, announcing the end of the lunch break. With a wave Mila disappeared into one of the buildings.

I walked back to "The Little School" as though in a trance. Why couldn't this happen to me? I was so tired of living with my aunt and uncle; they resented every kind of diversion I had, even reading a book or seeing a friend. I couldn't stand Uncle Aron's perpetual silence and their constant grief that enveloped the room like a shroud. I also had reasons to be unhappy. The war had turned me into an orphan; I still had not gotten over my mother's death and my father's absence. I was suffering too, but I was only sixteen years old; even in the ghetto I had to have a diversion sometimes. I needed to see people my age; I just couldn't suffer all the time.

* * *

A few days after I had met Mila there was a lot of excitement in "The Little School." Mordehai Chaim Rumkowski, the head of the ghetto, sent word that he would be coming to visit our school. For the next few days pandemonium reigned. We worked feverishly to complete the best examples of our work, which were to be displayed on the walls. Classrooms were cleaned by tirelessly working students and staff. Even

Mr. Zbar stopped by to see our preparations. Finally, the great moment arrived.

"He is here. I saw him. He is inspecting the whole factory," someone reported, adding to the excitement. At last, an announcement was made over the loudspeaker that Rumkowski wasn't coming up to "The Little School." He was running late. Instead, we were to go down to the yard where he would greet us.

Disappointed, we lined up in the yard, awaiting the arrival of this person who had the power to make decisions that spelled the difference between life and death in the ghetto. Soon there was a commotion. The yard was being cleared and a hush fell over it as Rumkowski neared. He was an imposing figure, tall and slightly stooped, with a shock of silver-gray hair. He exuded authority. We stood in silence as he slowly walked around, accompanied by his bodyguard, looking at each of us, his piercing blue eyes seeming to penetrate our whole being.

"What happened to your tooth? Did you eat it?"

I looked up, realizing that he was talking to me. Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, The Eldest of the Jews of Litzmannstadt Ghetto, the man whose image had stared at me many times from ghetto newspapers, postage stamps and money; the man feared and detested by nearly everyone, was talking to me.

"No," I smiled my gap-toothed smile. "I broke it."

"What is your name?"

"Madzia. Madzia Kochaner." I stammered.

"Josef," he called out to his assistant. "Send her to Doctor Teichner to have her teeth fixed."

Doctor Teichner was the most prominent dental surgeon in the ghetto. While Josef was busily scribbling, Mr. Zbar whispered into Rumkowski's ear loud enough for me to hear:

"She's an orphan."

"What would you like me to do for you, little one?"

What would I like? I didn't hesitate. I had it on the tip of my tongue as though I had been rehearsing it all my life.

"I would like to be adopted by you and live in Marysin."

He looked at me thoughtfully.

"Who are you?"

Who am I, I thought to myself and realized that I had to come up with something good, something that would make him accept me.

Suddenly remembering that my uncle's name had been mentioned in connection with the orphans' home which Rumkowski headed before the war, I burst out,

"I think you knew my uncle, Gerszon Lichtenstein."

He nodded without saying a word, scrutinizing me.

"How do you know about my children, heh?" he asked me with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

"I know Mila Tannen. She told me about it."

I could hardly contain my excitement. In my wildest dreams I didn't expect this to happen, but here I was,

talking about the very things I had been fantasizing about ever since I had met Mila.

"You are a smart little girl," Rumkowski said, pinching my cheek. "Josef, she is going to Marysin as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir."

With a nod to Mr. Zbar, he was gone.

Surrounded by girls from "The Little School," the teachers, Mr. Zbar and some onlookers, I was being hugged, someone was shaking my hand, people were congratulating me and talking to me at the same time. I didn't know what to say, but I did know that my life would never be the same.

When I got home, Aunt Gucia was back from work already.

"Aunt Gucia, I shouted, "Guess what happened to me today. I..."

"Quiet, child, quiet, Calm down."

More slowly now, I related the whole story to her. She remained composed.

"We will see if he really means it. In the meantime, wash up and get your dinner ready. You must be hungry."

I was beside myself with elation, and all she could think of was dinner. I was hungry, but in my excitement I forgot the hunger--this was more important. Uncle's reaction was even more contained than my aunt's.

"Aha, well,..." his voice trailed off, and I knew that he was thinking of his daughter, Bela. Quietly, I undressed and went to bed.

JULY 1943

A few days later, I was excused from work in order to go to one of the factories, accompanied by Josef, Mr. Rumkowski's assistant, to have my measurements taken for a couple of dresses, a skirt, a jacket and a coat. I selected some underwear which I was able to take with me. Next Josef and I went to a shoe factory, where my feet were measured for shoes. I was going through the motions, still not quite believing that all of this was actually happening to me. I was getting new, made-to-order clothes, shoes with leather soles, just like before the war. I had been wearing shoes with wood soles for quite a while now.

There were no stores in the ghetto. The only clothes one could buy were on the "black market" in the street; tired old rags, inherited in all likelihood by relatives of a deceased family member; the few coins gotten from the sale used to buy an extra ration of bread. The clothes, shoes, and other items manufactured in the ghetto factories, were designated almost exclusively for Germans. These factories were the sole reason for the ghetto's existence--we were needed to supply German soldiers with uniforms and the civilian German population with clothes to wear. As with everything else, there were exceptions to the rule. If the head of the ghetto gave an order, the rules could be bent a little.

Mila stopped by at "The Little School" to let me know that I was to visit my future home on the following Sunday. By now, my aunt and uncle accepted the news with their usual

genteel equanimity. They finally believed that what I told them was actually going to happen.

I made the long trip to Marysin on foot, my new tooth firmly in place. During the long walk, I was trying to imagine the place I would soon call home. Marysin had been added to the ghetto to accommodate the influx of Jews from Germany and European countries conquered by the Germans, who had been deported to the Lodz ghetto. Unlike most of the ghetto, Marysin was not old and decrepit. It was suburban; it had lots of trees and small one-family houses. I was not familiar with the area; I only knew the section where my high school had been located. Mila had told me that the area where they lived was occupied mostly by members of Rumkowski's cabinet and his trusted aides.

I found the house easily. It was a large, substantial red brick structure, surrounded by a grassy lawn and old trees. At my ring, Mila materialized at the door, as though she had been waiting there for my arrival.

"Hello, Madzia. Did you have difficulty finding us?"

"No, I had no trouble at all."

"First I'll take you to meet the lady who takes care of us, Frau Doctor Stein. She's from Prague, and she is not a doctor. Her husband was one, and as is the custom in German-speaking countries, she gets to be called Frau Doctor."

Mila led me up a flight of stairs and knocked on a door. A tall, statuesque woman of about fifty, with nicely styled golden-blond hair, appeared. Frau Doctor Stein shook

my hand and smiled warmly--a friendly heroine from a Wagnerian opera.

"Mila, please take Madzia to meet everyone. You could show her the house afterwards. I'll see you later."

She spoke in Polish, with only a hint of a foreign accent; her voice well-modulated and pleasant. On the way down, Mila told me a little about the children I would be meeting. They were a cosmopolitan bunch, having been deported to the Lodz ghetto with their parents from several European countries occupied by Germany, as well as from towns surrounding Lodz. All of them had become orphaned in the ghetto and somehow were chosen to be "adopted" by Rumkowski.

"I should tell you what the 'adoption' really means," Mila said, while we were walking. "It isn't anything formal, there were no papers to sign, it was more of an agreement. Mr. Rumkowski, who cares about children a lot, initiated it by actually adopting Stasiek, whom you will meet soon. Stasiek lives with Mr. Rumkowski and his wife. He also encouraged ghetto 'dignitaries' to follow suit. As a result, some of them also 'adopted' orphaned children."

The idea of being scrutinized by a group of teenagers filled me with trepidation. Being shy, I didn't like to be on display. As we neared the playroom my heart began to beat furiously.

The room we entered was very large, empty except for a few chairs and a couple of tables set against a long wall. A bin with sports equipment stood in a corner. This room

was used mainly as a playroom and a classroom. A huge window spanned the length of it letting in the midday sun. A group of teenagers were engaged in play. When we entered, they stopped their activities and remained standing, looking at us expectantly.

"Listen, everyone, I would like to introduce Madzia Kochaner, who will be joining us soon. You can finish your game, we will wait," Mila announced.

Almost immediately, a tall, good-looking boy picked up a ball from the floor. It was the size of a watermelon. He heaved it at me, yelling "catch." Caught unawares, I instinctively spread my arms to catch it, but I wasn't prepared for the monstrously heavy thing that landed on my stomach, nearly knocking me over. I reeled, trying not to lose my balance. Some of the boys convulsed with laughter. Tears came to my eyes, from the hurt and humiliation. My only wish was to become invisible and disappear from the room.

But there was no place to hide from these mean, unfeeling boys. Virtually paralyzed, embarrassed and angry, I just stood there, not knowing what to do. Mila scolded the offender, who muttered an apology. She explained to me that this was a "medicine" ball, very heavy, as I had already found out. Soon Mila started the introductions,

"Madzia, this is Lili; she is the oldest of our group. The girl near her is Inga."

I tried to imprint their names in my memory--Lili, a heavy-set tall blonde with straight hair parted to the side,

and Inga, very tall and thin, with large brown eyes and straight brown hair.

"The little one is Alicia. She is the youngest. We call her Ala."

Alicia threw me a kiss. I couldn't help being struck by her beauty. Golden curls surrounded a perfectly oval face with huge blue eyes shadowed by long lashes. Pink cheeks highlighted a healthy complexion. Ala didn't look like she belonged in the ghetto; she was a picture of health. Next to her, a boy and a girl were holding hands. The girl was plain-looking, while the boy was handsome with a friendly smile and a self-confident stance.

"Meet Fredzia and Mietek. They are brother and sister. Now we are coming to Jonatan--you may remember him from before," Mila said, pointing her finger at him.

And indeed, I did. It was the boy who threw the ball at me. He was very handsome, and obviously knew it. Blond and blue-eyed, Jonatan could be a prototype for a Hitler Youth Poster. His smirking, self-assured mouth added to that impression. He smiled at me showing off milky-white teeth.

"And here is Natan, Jonatan's best friend. They are from the same town."

Natan wasn't very good-looking. His nose was too long and his expression was pained. He nodded, without looking up at me.

"See the three boys standing together? The shortest is my brother, Janek. The tallest is Walter and the one in

between is Harry."

The three boys were all nice-looking, with open, friendly faces. Harry and Walter seemed to be about the same age, fifteen or sixteen. Janek about thirteen. Like all the children, they were clean-looking and neatly dressed. All three lined up in a mock salute.

Mila looked around the room.

"I almost left out my best friend and roommate, Renia. She is the one sitting on the window sill."

Laughing, Renia got up and joined us. I could tell that laughing came easy to her. Renia had an impish face, dark curly hair and brown eyes.

"We will see you at lunch," Mila said to her, and turning to me, added:

"I'll show you the rest of the house now. We'll start with the kitchen."

I followed Mila to a large, well-equipped kitchen. A woman was preparing something at the sink. She was robust and sturdily built, her brown hair held in a bun, her ruddy cheeks a sign of good health--all too rare in the ghetto. She was talking to a young man standing next to her.

"Hela, this is Madzia. She will be coming to live with us soon. Madzia, meet our cook, Hela and our man-of-all-trades, Jakub."

"How are you, Madzia? Are you having a nice visit? We are looking forward to having you here," Hela said, a friendly smile making her plain face light up. Jakub remained silent.

Adjacent to the kitchen was a large dining room, almost filled with an enormous table and chairs. An upright piano was nestled against the wall.

"Now we will go upstairs where the girls' rooms are. Later you will meet our tutor, Dr. Halina Kowalska. She is a doctor of philosophy, but she is weird and the boys make fun of her."

The girls' bedrooms were neat, each with two single beds, two chests of drawers and a tall wardrobe. There were white curtains on the windows. The center bedroom, occupied by Lili and Inga had a balcony facing the front of the house. The overall effect was pleasing and well above ghetto standards. I couldn't wait to move in!

"Let's stop at Frau Doctor's room."

Frau Doctor appeared at the door to answer Mila's knock.

"Well, were you impressed?" she asked me with a twinkle in her eyes.

"You will be joining us next week, after you have your medical examination. I think you will like it here. What do you think?"

"Yes!" I said emphatically. "I know I will like it very much."

I will have to pinch myself later, to make sure that all this was not some kind of a dream. But the voices were real, the house was as solid as a rock and the sun shining above was not a dream. This was really happening to me.

AUGUST 1943

The last week spent with my aunt and uncle dragged on even though it was a whirlwind of activities. I had to pick up my new, made-to-order clothes and shoes, and see a doctor for a medical exam. In the ghetto, everything one had was precious. There were very few sources for buying consumer goods of any kind. In the third year of the war, the clothes I had when the war started were long outgrown. Some of my current scanty wardrobe was altered from Mother's after her death. A few of Mother's dresses were still in my possession. I didn't want to part with them--they were the only link to Mother that I had. Yet, I hesitated whether or not to take them with me. After giving it some thought, I decided that with my newly acquired dressmaking skills, I would be able to alter or redo them if I needed to. The same was true of Mother's sweaters. There was no reason to get rid of them. I could unravel the sweaters and reuse the yarn to knit new ones out of them. I had been doing this for a while now and was able to design the sweaters myself.

Not having to part with the last remnants of Mother's belongings made me feel better. I finished packing in a better mood.

When I said goodbye to my aunt and uncle, I promised to visit them soon, not realizing how hard that would be for me. As it turned out, I only saw them once after I moved to Marysin. Communicating in the ghetto was very difficult. There were no phones for public use. It was a long way from my new home in Marysin to Aunt and Uncle's

place, and going off on one's own was discouraged by Frau Doctor. We usually traveled to and from work as a group, the boys to their factory, we to ours. I was no longer in the "Little School," but had joined the other girls in the factory where they all worked now. We worked in a women's undergarment section of a clothing factory, and like the other girls, I became a sewing machine operator. We were working on girdles and brassieres, our job consisting of joining two pieces of a garment. It was a monotonous task, but we became proficient at it.

I soon grew accustomed to my new way of life. The most important change was the feeling of being part of a family and the companionship and support we provided for each other. For the first time in a long while, I felt protected; I felt free to act and think like the teenager I was. During Mother's illness, I had assumed the role of caretaker and nurse. After her death, while living with the Hermans, I had to behave like an adult because they felt that the times called for it. Now, I was being taken care of--it was a good feeling. My days were well-organized and full of activities.

In the morning, we all got up at the same time; we washed, dressed and prepared for work after a quick bite of bread and tea. Our bread rations were kept for us in the pantry under lock and key, guarded by Hela, our cook. Our evening meal was prepared and waiting when we came back from work. Dinner was eaten together. It was a pleasant time, but we never had enough food to fill us up. The food was

tasty, although it was usually just a plate of soup.

Later in the evening, we had tutoring with Dr. Kowalska whose specialty was German literature. She often read poems to us by German poets such as Schiller and Goethe. Like most of the girls, I enjoyed the poems very much, but some of the boys were not interested in poetry and found it difficult to sit still. They would start talking or get up and invent excuses for leaving the room.

"Dr. Kowalska," they would say, using the well-rehearsed line, "I have to go to the bathroom real bad. Can I be excused?"

Dr. Kowalska had a hard time keeping order. It was obvious that her former pupils didn't include teenage boys. She would make an effort to disregard them, but her stilted delivery often provoked the boys' laughter. Offended, she would turn red in the face and scream at them, only intensifying their glee.

I wasn't happy about sharing a room with Dr. Kowalska. Unfortunately, all the girls were already paired up and there was no room for me with any of them. Frau Doctor promised to find a solution to this problem soon, but in the meantime I had to be Dr. Kowalska's reluctant roommate.

Her room was located on the main floor, just beyond the playroom. It was a large room, with a double window facing the front of the building. Though obviously not thrilled at having to share her room with me, she nevertheless prepared for my arrival and showed me where to put my belongings.

"I made space for you in my wardrobe," she told me,

enunciating every word as though she were lecturing.

The huge, dark wardrobe dominated the room. Vials of medicines, toothpaste and toothbrushes, hairpins and combs full of hair, towels and washcloths, clean and used vied for space with a piece of dry bread in a napkin. Rolls of toilet paper were lined up on a shelf. Inexplicably, little pieces of squashed toilet paper were strewn about. Soon I noticed that Dr. Kowalska suffered from sniffles and used toilet paper to blow her nose. She did not throw the used paper away, but saved it for reuse. Although Dr. Kowalska made some space for me, the space was neither adequate, nor very appealing.

Dr. Kowalska, a robust woman in her late forties, wore her dark brown hair braided and twirled around her head. She wore no makeup, but her thick lips were always adorned with blood-red lipstick. Dr. Kowalska had a lot of clothes and seemed to prefer tailored suits which she usually wore with frilly blouses. Her shoes were always brown oxfords.

I was often prodded to disclose Dr. Kowalska's habits and eccentricities. I couldn't resist telling someone about her practice of wearing a crocheted capelet to bed, which earned her the nickname "pelerynka"--Polish for capelet. This nickname caught on with everyone, including at times, Frau Doctor, who had a keen sense of humor. It was inevitable for Dr. Kowalska to become a butt for practical jokes, as her eccentric behavior lent itself to ridicule, especially from teenage boys always on the lookout for entertainment.

Dr. Kowalska always carried a large fur muff wherever

she went. The muff served as a repository for used tissues. The boys decided to play a trick on her. One day, when Dr. Kowalska was on the way to the dining room, they threw a bunch of squashed tissues in her path, and Jonatan cried out,

"Dr. Kowalska, you dropped something!"

The poor lady, scarlet-faced, frantically proceeded to pick up the tissues, to the accompaniment of the boys' loud laughter. I felt a twinge of remorse for my part in this.

To get away from Dr. Kowalska's company in the evenings, I would sometimes go to the dining room, where I could put on the light and read. It was quiet and warm there and I could read undisturbed. One of the boys, Harry, would often join me. We got into the habit of talking about our families and our life before the war. Harry, like me was an only child. He was from Gdynia, a port in the northern part of Poland, on the Baltic Sea. His dream was to sail and explore faraway places. He was very bright and had a good sense of humor. Aside from my talks with Harry, I never spoke with anyone about their family history, nor was I asked any questions about myself. I used to wonder if this was a defense mechanism which we had acquired in order not to show our emotions in front of others. It seemed to me that the important thing was to live in the present and not dwell on the past.

We all knew Renia's story and how she wound up in the Lodz ghetto. It wasn't that Renia herself talked a lot about it; it was somehow part of her. We also knew that Lili had studied operatic singing in Vienna and spoke German

fluently. As for the rest, they were known by what they displayed of themselves; some were lovable, some pleasant, and a few even obnoxious at times; on the whole most were well behaved and intrinsically good. We got along exceptionally well for an "ersatz family."

Rumkowski, of course, wasn't a real father--a godfather was a more appropriate term. While he did help us with material things, which were of foremost importance in the ghetto, his attitude toward us was not fatherly. The only one he paid much attention to was Lucy. He was enthralled by her singing, but in retrospect, I think it was also her voluptuous figure which separated her from the rest of the girls, not nearly as generously endowed, and consequently much more childlike in appearance.

Before I came to Marysin, everything I heard about Rumkowski was negative. My parents and the neighbors with whom they spoke blamed him almost in equal measure with the Germans for our suffering. As head of the ghetto he was held responsible for our hunger and other misfortunes. Rarely was a good word said about him; to the ordinary ghetto inhabitant he was a dictator. Every edict he pronounced was construed as meant to harm us. Even when he would tell us about an extra ration of food, he was greeted with rancor.

"What he is giving us is not enough to keep us from starvation! We need much more food in order to survive."

Now I saw him in a very different light. He was our benefactor; our whole existence hinged on his generosity. Without him we could not survive.

SEPTEMBER 1943

On Sundays we were off from work. It was a day which was designated for household chores; cleaning our rooms, changing linens and doing laundry. Each girl had, in addition to doing her own laundry, the added responsibility of doing one boy's wash and ironing his shirts. Washing was done by hand, in a tub filled with hot water. Some of the boys were very fussy about their shirts and complained about the ironing. Luckily, I was the odd girl, so I didn't have to do this chore. I didn't miss it. I didn't think it was fair for the girls to have to do the work for two.

We tried to keep busy all the time. Being occupied was therapeutic. Every evening after dinner, we had classes with Dr. Kowalska. Some of the girls started a reading group. We took turns reading aloud, since we usually had only one copy of a book. Those who knew how to knit always had various projects; others would busy themselves with altering or remaking old garments. The boys were busy doing various things with tools they would borrow from work. We were seldom alone; in a way, it was a blessing. It helped us to cope with the rough moments that each of us must have had.

Being part of such a large group after sixteen years years spent as an only child, was exciting. Some were really nice--both Harry and Mila's brother, Janek, had endearing qualities. There was an appealing honesty about Harry. Janek had a gentle demeanor and good manners. Mietek, who was closest to Janek in years, was a cheerful boy, but there was an unbecoming toughness in him. Jonatan was the same age

as Mietek but looked older because he was so tall. He wasn't really a bad person, just spoiled, because people reacted to his good looks by giving in to him and letting him have what he wanted. Natan, a perpetual complainer and hypochondriac, was kept in line by Frau Doctor who knew how to handle him. Walter, a native of Berlin, had the stereotypical Germanic looks--he was blond and blue-eyed and had a superior demeanor, which wasn't very likable.

The girls were more complex. Lili who was from Prague, was the oldest--she was over eighteen. She was a bit of an outsider--she seemed to be more at ease with Frau Doctor than with us. Inga, fifteen, was from Berlin. Determined to speak Polish, she amused us with her funny way of pronouncing some words. Fredzia, was dour and whined a lot. She didn't get close to any of us--she clung to her brother, Mietek for support.

The youngest, Alicia, was from Luxembourg. Alicia was unusual; she impressed everyone with her maturity, good manners and intelligence. It seemed that there wasn't anything that she couldn't do, though she was only eleven. Even her Polish, which she had learned only recently, was precise and unaccented. She was the best organized of all of us and when she was in a good mood, would offer to help others with their chores. She particularly liked tidying up drawers and folding clothes. Ala could be very sweet, but when crossed, she would retort with icy cynicism, rare in such a young child. It was probably her defense against the terror and loss she had suffered. Like other young children

she was murdered in Auschwitz.

Renia was from Bialystok, a city in the northeastern part of Poland, close to the Russian border. She had been on her way to an undisclosed death camp, when she and an uncle with whom she was traveling, jumped from the speeding train. They were spotted, shot at and captured, but Renia suffered only a broken arm. Both she and her uncle were taken into the Lodz ghetto where they were hospitalized. In the hospital, Renia was separated from her uncle, and was never able to find out whether he was allowed to stay in the ghetto or was killed by the Germans.

Renia and Natan, who was also in the hospital at the time, were the first to be adopted by Rumkowski and set up in a small apartment in the center of the ghetto. As more children joined them, they moved to the house in Marysin. Renia was an outgoing, friendly girl, whose voice had the sing-song quality of her native region. She spoke Russian and Yiddish fluently and was sometimes called on to translate for those of us who didn't know Yiddish.

Our "family" of thirteen was visited almost every day by two boys. One of them was Stasiek, the boy who had been adopted by Rumkowski and his wife and lived with them. Stasiek came to our house every day after dinner and stayed till the evening. He had his own bike, a source of great pride to him. No one was allowed to use it except Jonatan and Natan, his best friends. Stasiek was an unpleasant fellow, stuck-up and self-important. He even looked different from our boys, as he wore more formal,

expensive-looking clothes. In the winter he always wore button-down shirts, topped by wool sweaters in cold weather and brown or grey tweed suits. In warm weather he would change into more informal, short-sleeved shirts and slacks.

Stasiek and another boy, Alek, who was adopted by one of Rumkowski's top aides, were included in our lessons with Dr. Kowalska. Alek was the complete opposite of Stasiek. Easygoing and friendly, he was well-liked. He too, had his own bicycle, which he let our boys use. None of the girls knew how to ride a bike.

The incongruity of the display of material objects in the midst of such misery in the ghetto, struck me as excessive in the beginning, but somehow, I learned to accept these things after a while. There were other examples of excess. Across the street from our house lived a family whose little girl had a pony. We would see her sometimes, riding her pony, accompanied by a young girl who was taking care of her. The father of the little girl was a ghetto "big shot," and as such, had a life-style which was very different from that of ordinary ghetto inhabitants.

How did it feel to be adopted by the head of the ghetto, a man in whose hands lay the fate of so many people? We considered ourselves special, and with it came a certain arrogance. One of the privileges we enjoyed, was the ability to take the ghetto streetcar to work and back. The streetcar was mostly an accommodation for Rumkowski's aides who lived in Marysin and had a long trek to work. There were always several people waiting for the tram. One man

who was there every day attracted our attention. He had slicked down black hair and a trim mustache. He looked ill-at-ease and his eyes darted in all directions, not making contact with anyone. Lili noticed him first.

"Look at that man standing there," she said. "Doesn't he look weird? What do you think he does?"

We decided he looked like a barber. He would have to be assigned to cut hair of important people, to be allowed to use the streetcar. From that morning on, he was under our constant scrutiny. We referred to him in conversation as "the barber," and made him squirm as we stared at him unashamedly and giggled. This went on for several weeks, until he stopped appearing, leaving behind an aura of mystery. Sometimes I wondered how we could be so callous. We didn't have it that much better than the average person, as far as food was concerned. But we had each other--the group acted as a shield that held us together.

OCTOBER 1943

A few weeks after my arrival, a tall, dark-haired man of about fifty came to visit us one evening after dinner. He was introduced by Frau Doctor as Karl Fischel, a pianist. Mr. Fischel was a friendly man who engaged us in light conversation. When he found out that Lili was trained for the opera, he offered to accompany her on the piano while she sang the sad aria from "Madama Butterfly," in which Cio-Cio-San voices her hope that the handsome American officer will come back to her one day. Lili sang in German. Her voice was probably mediocre, but to our untrained ears it sounded wonderful. My favorite of Lili's songs was the popular Viennese song, "Wien, Wien, nur du allein." Lili sang it often, and now, accompanied on the piano by Mr. Fischel, it sounded better than ever.

We thought that Mr. Fischel was a wonderful pianist; he seemed to know everything, from operas to popular and classical music. He also played jazz, to our enthusiastic approval. Jazz was completely new to me, but it appealed to me immediately. I enjoyed its rhythm immensely--something about it was sad, but at the same time pleasing in a way I couldn't describe. Mr. Fischel became a frequent visitor throughout the winter. He brought excitement to our life because of his music. Mr. Fischel introduced some of us to classical music and provided tickets for us to concerts performed by the ghetto orchestra. We went to several of them; they were a special treat to me. The ghetto orchestra was professional, made up of some natives of Lodz, and others

culled from the large influx of Jews who were transported to the ghetto from Germany and German-occupied countries.

As always, curious, we prodded Hela for information about Mr. Fischel, as he and Frau Doctor usually retired to Frau Doctor's room after the recitals. The big question was, was he married? Hela was evasive for a while, but in the end told us that Mr. Fischel was married, but estranged from his wife. That ended the speculation.

Rumkowski's visits were always a diversion for us. He would drop in unexpectedly, arriving in his horse-drawn carriage, sometimes bringing some special gifts of food. He seemed to enjoy the time he spent with us, chatting with some of us individually, but his favorite was unquestionably Lili. He would ask her to sing for him, and seemed completely relaxed as she went through her songs and arias. Any vestige of the tough, ruthless person abhorred and feared by the ghetto inhabitants seemed to disappear as he sat quietly, listening to Lili singing.

I wasn't sure if he remembered who I was, but he did, and would make comments about my red hair, which children loved to make fun of, but adults usually admired. I was self-conscious about the color of my hair, but from comments of adults I realized that they liked my hair, which was not quite red, but more strawberry-blonde. I remember one time before the war, when an acquaintance of mother's said something complimentary about my hair. She also remarked that I had subtle features. I didn't know what the word "subtle" meant. When I asked Mother, she explained that my

features were small and that the lady meant it as a compliment.

In spite of the extra food that Rumkowski would bring occasionally, we were hungry most of the time. We always finished our meals craving for more. We were hungry, but not to the point of real suffering. It was harder for the boys; they needed more food than we did. It was hard for them to divide their weekly bread ration into daily portions; the temptation to eat more was too great. One day Natan suggested to the boys that they not eat any of their daily bread for a whole week, subsisting on the thin soup that they got at work and the more substantial one they had at dinner. At the end of the week they could have the whole loaf of bread they had saved and eat to their heart's content. They actually carried it off. Most of the boys thought it would be great to have a whole loaf of bread to eat at one sitting; that was their idea of paradise. They persuaded Frau Doctor to give them permission to save their bread. Hela cooperated by storing it in the pantry. The boys spent the week walking listlessly around, complaining of hunger and talking about food a lot, but they persevered. It was quite a sight when they finally claimed their bread at the end of their fast and sat down at the table on Sunday morning, each with a knife in hand and kept eating until there was nothing left. Only the two youngest, Mietek and Janek couldn't finish it all, but they accomplished what they strove to do--to fill their stomachs until they could eat no more. Would they do it again, someone asked them.

Probably not, according to most of the boys. The price they had to pay by starving all week was too high.

Just before Yom Kippur, the holiest of Jewish holidays, we had a discussion with Frau Doctor about fasting. There was going to be no food served till dinner that day, in accordance with Jewish religious law. While we were encouraged to fast, Frau Doctor told us that if any of us couldn't hold out till the end of the fast, our daily portion of bread would be available on request. Some of us had never fasted before, but we were all willing to try. The majority of us didn't have strong religious convictions, it was more a case of finding out if we could do it.

When the day came, everyone seemed to be fine until the afternoon. By three o'clock some of us started to complain and become restless. Our stomachs were telling us that it was time to eat. Walter was the first to ask for his bread. Relieved, I soon followed in his footsteps. Others did the same, but a few decided to stick it out till the end. Little did we know that this fast was only a rehearsal for much longer enforced fasts which we would be powerless to reverse.

Before dinner that night, we all went to a local place set up for the Holy days for people in the neighborhood. It was only a small room set aside for those who wanted to gather, or to say their prayers. We listened to the service and the singing that followed. Standing there huddled together, I felt a warmth--the service made me feel like never before that we were a family, the only one we had.

NOVEMBER 1943

Boredom caused the boys to play a very nasty trick on Dr. Kowalska. They were always tinkering with electrical things, and one day, Natan had a "brilliant idea." He would attach an electric wire to a brass door handle in order to give Dr. Kowalska a shock when she passed by on her way to the dining room. Some of the girls tried to talk him out of it; it was a cruel practical joke which could have had repercussions if something were to happen to Dr. Kowalska. In spite of our pleas, Natan refused to change his mind. With the help of his pal, Jonatan, he electrified the door handle.

We were all in the playroom, waiting for Dr. Kowalska to appear. When we heard her footsteps in the hallway, we stopped talking, waiting in suspense, curious, but frightened, as well. The door handle turned, and a heart-rending scream filled the room. Natan ran to the door and pushed it open. Dr. Kowalska practically fell into the room, her face as red as a beet, clutching her right hand. Dr. Kowalska was a sturdy woman, most of the time calm and in perfect control. To see her like this, in a state of hysteria, unable to control her crying or regain her equilibrium, was embarrassing. I felt ashamed.

We shouldn't have let this happen. I knew that most of us felt as I did. It was the wrong thing to do, and yet, we weren't strong enough to put a stop to it. As a rule, going to Frau Doctor to "spill the beans" when someone was transgressing was frowned upon.

The distraught Dr. Kowalska headed straight for Frau Doctor's room. A few minutes later, the two ladies entered the playroom, Dr. Kowalska, still sobbing, Frau Doctor's face grim. In a loud voice she demanded to know who the guilty party was, and asked for those who had something to do with this to step forward immediately.

"You will all remain in this room without dinner until I get a confession from the person or persons who did this awful thing to Dr. Kowalska. These nasty tricks have to stop."

This was serious--no one was ready to give up dinner--we were too hungry for that. All eyes rested on Natan, sitting with his face down, unable to face us. Finally, after what seemed like a long time, he got up, walked over to Frau Doctor, his head still down, and confessed to having masterminded the plan, and offered to take the blame for it. We were all waiting for Frau Doctor to mete out an appropriate punishment, but before she had a chance to say anything, the strangest thing happened. Dr. Kowalska, who by now regained some of her composure, said,

"Frau Doctor, please don't punish Natan. I hope that his conscience will bother him just a little, and that he'll learn something from this. I have forgiven him. As for the others, I wish they would also examine their consciences; it's wrong to be a participant in such a sneaky, cowardly act. It's my hope that this will put an end to similar pranks; these times call for more sober things to do."

When she finished, she calmly turned to Frau Doctor.

"Why don't we go to dinner now? It's quite late already. Surely we're all very hungry by now."

With this, she led the way to the dining room. I greatly admired her on that occasion.

DECEMBER 1943

Another winter in the ghetto was settling in for a long siege. For our group, this would be the first winter spent in the house in Marysin. The previous winter the few children lived in an apartment. Frau Doctor realized that it would be impossible to heat all of the bedrooms separately. The small amount of wood and coal that was available, had to be used primarily for the kitchen stove. It was only December, but we were already freezing in the unheated bedrooms. Frau Doctor spoke to Rumkowski about getting more coal, but he didn't promise anything--coal was very hard to come by. They decided that it would be easier to change the girls' quarters for the winter. There was an attic on the top floor where our bathing area was. The three small attic rooms were not used. A pot-bellied stove was installed in the area between the rooms, and all the girls, including myself were moved to the attic. I moved in with Mila and Renia, both of whom I liked a lot. There wasn't much space in the room, but I was happy to become, at last, a member of the girls' group. My parting with Dr. Kowalska was amiable; we were both satisfied with the outcome. The attic rooms were warmer than the rooms below. The stove kept going till late evening and generated enough heat so we could bathe comfortably.

After work, chilled from the long trip, we were happy to stay indoors. The warmest room was, of course, the kitchen, but Hela did not abide visitors lingering in her domain while she was preparing dinner. We were always hungry

before dinner, but there was nothing to eat. Hela couldn't help us; we had to wait until dinner, there were no snacks. The few of us who were able to save some of our daily bread ration for the afternoon, were envied by the others. For the rest, the only thing to do was to keep busy and try to forget about the hunger. Most of the girls had hobbies to occupy their time; but our favorite way to while away time was by reading aloud. I remember several books that we had read aloud that winter. Two of them in particular made a lasting impression on me. They were "The Citadel," and "The Stars Look Down," both by the British writer, A.J. Cronin. Even in the midst of our own misfortunes, we were moved by the Welsh coal miners, whose lives were so poignantly depicted in those books.

Occasionally, Rumkowski would stop by in the evening, unannounced, sometimes bringing with him some goodies for us. One of his visits brought us an unexpected bounty. During the winter, vegetables were in short supply, and often arrived in the ghetto frozen and rotten. Rumkowski stopped by, seemingly in a good mood, and announced right off that he had a couple of sacks of potato peels for us. Potato peels meant extra food; they supplied nourishment and filled empty stomachs. Everyone was happy with the pancakes which Hela made from the ground-up peels. To my chagrin, I wasn't able to eat them. After eating the pancakes once, I got sick and developed a bad stomach-ache. Although I wanted to, badly, I was never able to eat the pancakes again without getting an upset stomach. The smell alone, while they were

frying, was enough to make me feel nauseated.

We were always looking forward to birthdays. On those occasions Hela would prepare special treats for us. The food would be a little better and more filling, something extra would be added, but the one thing that made birthdays an event to look forward to, was the birthday cake that Hela always managed to bake. It was a delicious cake, despite the fact that there were no eggs in it and very little oil. It was usually topped with jam, which was never otherwise served. Hela always had the cake ready when we came back from work. She would cut it in squares, taking care to have each portion almost exactly the same size. It was the girls' job to bring the food to the table from the kitchen. Lili, a big girl with a big appetite, would scrutinize the portions, her watery blue eyes darting from one piece to another as she was scanning the tray to make sure that no one would get a piece of cake bigger than hers. We used to giggle about it in private, but had never let her know that we noticed.

After each birthday dinner there was entertainment provided by Lili. She loved to perform and we loved to hear her repertoire of arias and Viennese songs, with which she regaled us over and over again. We never tired of them, no matter how many times we would hear them. When Mr. Fishel was there, it made it even more special, but the cold weather was bad for his lungs. He would cough a lot and often had to stay home in bed. We missed him when he wasn't there. His presence contributed to our well-being.

JANUARY 1944

Shortly after the beginning of the year, Rumkowski came to tell us that he made arrangements for all the girls to work in a newly-opened clothing factory in Marysin, within easy walking distance from our house. He gave us many reasons why we should transfer to this new factory. It sounded like he was trying to talk us into it, but we had no objections, in fact we were very eager to transfer. Our present job was boring and the trip was long. We were looking forward to the new job.

The following morning we arrived at the new place full of anticipation and eager to do anything we had to. The workplace was very different from our old one. Here we were in a very large room, full of sewing machines and worktables. We soon found out that the work here would be more difficult than the one we did before. We would be assembling dresses from individual parts, from the first to the last stage. The dresses were simple "dirndls"--they had gathered waists and puffed sleeves and were made of cotton fabric. The background colors were dark--navy, maroon or brown, with little flowers printed in an overall pattern.

Each of us was did one phase of work; the older girls were in the advanced group and had to do the more difficult operations. A few of the younger ones were assigned to do the easier work, cleaning the garment of stray threads after it was finished and sewing on buttons.

What was so different about this place was that there were other workers in our room--young girls, who we found

out lived in a nearby orphanage. It was obvious that their circumstances were different from ours, as they were poorly dressed and generally didn't look well-cared for. They told us that a number of them had tuberculosis, some even in advanced stages. The girls coughed a lot and sometimes spit up blood. Yet, here they were, working alongside us, casually talking about their disease, as though they had the sniffles. What bothered me was that Rumkowski, who was surely aware that there was a virtual epidemic of tuberculosis among them, had tried to convince us that we would be changing for the better. Didn't he realize that we might contract their disease from them? He surely knew that tuberculosis was contagious. Now there was nothing we could do about it. We spoke to Frau Doctor, but she told us not to worry, that we were not in any danger.

It seemed like this winter was even colder than the last few winters in the ghetto. It had been snowing a lot and our walk to work wasn't very pleasant. My fingers and toes were freezing in spite of the woolen gloves I was wearing. The sun was bright, but it didn't give any warmth. On the way to work one morning, I stepped into a pile of snow and found myself up to my hip in a cold, watery hole. My friends quickly helped me out of the hole, but my left shoe and stocking were completely drenched. I was shivering from the cold. Going to work in this condition was impossible. The girls suggested that I return to the house, rather than risk getting chills and maybe a fever at work. I walked the short distance to the house feeling miserable. Upon

entering I was greeted by Hela who was polishing the hallway floor. She looked at me, and told me that I looked sick.

"Whatever happened to you?" she asked.

When I described to her my mishap, she helped me undress and put me to bed. A few minutes later she brought me a plate of steaming hot oatmeal. This was a special treat; oatmeal was never served to us. I savored it to the last lick of the spoon. Soon after I finished, I fell asleep and dreamt of being in our pre-war apartment, sick in bed, and Mother feeding me oatmeal and telling me a story, the way she used to when I was little. It felt like being in heaven. I woke up, rested and cozy under my blanket, my stomach still full from the oatmeal, but Mother wasn't there. I looked around the attic room and realized that it was only a dream.

FEBRUARY 1944

Sunday afternoons in the winter tended to drag. We had lots to do in the morning, but once the work was done, restlessness and boredom would set in. It was usually too cold to go outside, so some of us complained to Frau Doctor. She promised to think of a solution. Sure enough, about a week later, she gathered us all together after dinner to tell us that she had a surprise for us for the coming Sunday. She had been able to find a wonderful solution to our winter blues. She would invite guests to perform for us on Sunday afternoons. She couldn't pay them, of course, but the performers were willing and happy to come to entertain us in exchange for a meal.

One of the performers whom we requested over and over again was a storyteller, Shai Edelman. He was extraordinary. He could imitate a myriad of characters by using his body and voice; he could sound like an old woman, cry like a baby, bark like a dog, crow like a rooster. He would duplicate sounds of various musical instruments, including a fiddle and a trumpet. Our favorite by far, was a skit about a Jewish wedding in a "shtetl" (village), in which he would depict all the characters, including the bride and the groom, the parents and aged grandparents as well as assorted guests, the rabbi, the musicians and various animals who happened to drop in, such as a goat and a rooster. Shai did his act in Yiddish, which not all of us understood, but it was easy to follow by watching the pantomime. His performances were great hits with all of us. Shai was always our number one choice.

Although quite young, Shai was practically blind. He learned to recognize people intuitively by their voices and other characteristics. Shai came several times during that winter and became very adept at recognizing our voices and remembering our names. We thought it remarkable, but he just laughed when we asked him how he did it. Shai managed to survive the war and recognized me by my voice when I ran into him in a Displaced Persons camp.

Another of our guests who returned a few times was a concert violinist, a young, good-looking man who played sentimental Hungarian melodies as well as Chopin mazurkas and polonaises. In spite of his technique with the violin, there was something about him that didn't appeal to us. I think it was Lili who prejudiced us against him. She told us, probably without any foundation at all, that he had a venereal disease and admonished us to wash our hands after shaking his. All the girls ran to wash their hands right away. The boys chose to disregard the rumor.

The long winter brought its share of ailments to us, in the form of colds and sore throats. Both Inga and Walter had to go to the hospital to have their tonsils out. Some of us had persistent coughs, which were hard to cure. In addition to suffering from a cold, I was troubled by a persistent toothache which plagued me for days. Rumkowski happened to drop by one afternoon and seeing my face wrapped in a warm compress, he directed his driver to take me to the dentist. The abscessed tooth was extracted on the spot.

It was also during that winter that Harry began to

suffer from persistent headaches which didn't improve in spite of medication. Harry was diagnosed with a brain tumor and had to be hospitalized. He died shortly thereafter. His death affected us greatly. Harry was one of the nicest boys in the group. He was liked by everyone. I missed his sunny disposition and gentle manner.

MARCH 1944

Slowly, the harsh Polish winter began to give way to a reluctant spring, which brought longer days and gnawing feelings of restlessness. I ached to be free--to go outside the ghetto and to inhale fresh air and bask in a sun that was not defined by Nazi rules. I longed to warm my spirits caged in the grayness of the perpetual winter of our imprisonment. Marysin was a pretty area in the spring, the trees aglow with new buds starting to appear, and even an occasional flower reluctantly cutting through the winter soil.

I haven't visited Mother's grave since the fall. The cemetery was only a short distance away--I decided to go. I didn't want company--I wanted to be alone with my thoughts. Mother appeared in my dream recently, looking the way she looked before the war. I had gone to the cemetery shortly after I came to live in Marysin. I wanted to find Mother's grave. Mila and Renia offered to go with me. Mila's parents, who died in the ghetto were also buried there; she knew the way. Mila told me beforehand not to have great hopes of finding Mother's grave--she had been buried during a time when lots of people in the ghetto were dying every day--it would be unlikely for her to have a marked grave, she thought. The three of us set out to look, not expecting to find anything. It turned out that people were buried in the order in which they died; one needed only to know the date of death to find the grave. We found it easily. I returned several times before the winter. This time, after the winter's snowfalls, I had a harder time finding it. Guiding myself by remembered

landmarks, I succeeded in identifying the grave after a while, neglected after the ravages of winter. I cleaned it up as much as I could, removing some of the debris that had been blown there by the wind.

Away from the wartime graves, some of the headstones were big and elaborate. There were even some mausoleums, which belonged to the richest Jewish families of Lodz. Now everyone was equal; a dead Jew. I knew that my maternal grandfather was buried in this cemetery, because my mother and Aunt Gucia used to make a twice-yearly pilgrimage to his grave; once on the anniversary of his death, and again before the Jewish High Holidays. They would set out loaded with coins to distribute to beggars who kept vigil at the cemetery's gates, waiting for alms. Mother would return from the cemetery tired, lighter of purse, but somehow invigorated, more talkative than usual, as she described her encounters with the beggars, and the long streetcar trip to the remote outskirt of the city where the cemetery was located.

Mother's father died when I was a little over a year old. I knew what he looked like from photographs that Mother and her sisters had. In them, Grandfather seemed to be an imposing figure, tall, with a grey beard and gentle eyes. I knew that I would have liked him, had I known him. I had never seen any pictures of my paternal Grandfather and knew little about him, except that he was very religious. Father's mother was a handsome woman, dressed in old-fashioned, dark-colored clothes that almost reached to her ankles. She always wore a piece of jewelry, usually a large brooch pinned

to her dress. Her dark, almost black hair never varied in style, always perfectly combed. I once asked Mother about it. She told me that Grandmother wore a wig, as prescribed for Orthodox women. I assumed that her natural hair color was dark brown, but all her children had light hair, either blond or red.

After Father' left the ghetto, our contact with most of his family had ceased, because they lived too far away. It was hard for me to believe that except for the Laufers, the rest of Father's family might already be dead, deported during one of the selections. The Laufers, Aunt Hania and her family, were still in the ghetto, all working and doing comparatively well.

I had fond memories of visits to Aunt Hania's house before the war. As long as I could remember, Father's Mother lived with Aunt Hania, the oldest of Father's siblings. Aunt Hania's house had been the gathering place for Father's family on many Saturdays and holidays. I remember vividly a Hanukah ritual at the Laufers, which included a candle-lighting ceremony and a gift of "Hanukah Gelt" (Hanukah money) from Uncle Berish. Another ceremony in which I sometimes participated under Uncle Berish's tutelage, was the Saturday night Kiddush (prayer), where I would repeat the blessing intoned by Uncle Berish over the ceremonial wine. As a reward, I would be allowed to taste the sweet wine from the silver goblet. I had never questioned why this particular honor fell to me. Was it because I was the youngest, perhaps, knowing that my father was not an

observant Jew, Uncle Berish was trying to instill in me a knowledge of some of the religious rituals.

I liked Aunt Hania a lot. She was a generous and nice person. In addition, she had a well-deserved reputation as a wonderful cook and baker. The same was true of Grandmother--but she no longer cooked, she was too old.

My father broke with the Jewish tradition when he was a young man, but when visiting the Laufers on the Sabbath, he wouldn't break any of the Sabbath laws, because he knew that it would offend Uncle Berish. Traditionally, Saturday in a religious Jewish house was spent quietly--it was a day of rest; any physical activity was forbidden. Electric lights, or the stove were not to be turned on until the Sabbath was over. Father would grow impatient at times, itching to turn on the lights. Since he wasn't supposed to do it, he used me as the "Shabbes goy," (Sabbath Gentile) when I was little. He would lift me up to the light switch and show me how to turn on the lights. As a child, I was apparently immune from certain religious rules.

The war had put an end to family gatherings. There was no space to entertain, and not enough food to share with others.

APRIL 1944

Rumkowski came to visit on a Sunday morning. This in itself was unusual, but something in his manner indicated that it was a special visit. He had a mischievous, almost boyish grin as he called us all together.

"Come outside! All of you! There is something I want you to see. You may like it."

He led us outside. On the sidewalk, propped up against a tree were two brand-new bicycles, one for the boys and one for the girls. Mr. Rumkowski was not disappointed in our reaction. Even those of us who never rode a bike before, which included all the girls, were excited at the prospect of learning. Most of the boys already knew how to ride. There were cries of delight. Jonatan immediately grabbed the boys' bike and Mietek the girls' and took off.

From that day on, for the rest of the spring, the number one priority for me was bicycle-riding lessons. Not all the girls were interested in learning, so I didn't have a hard time getting the bike. Some of them tried, but gave up when they fell off and scraped their knees. I was an immediate enthusiast and was determined to learn to ride the bike, no matter what. The first few times were kind of scary. I would start out by having one of the boys hold on to the back of the bicycle, as I was still too shaky to proceed on my own. Walter was always very obliging; he was too polite to refuse. He had an ulterior motive as well. When I tired of riding he got to use the bike himself.

The problem was that once I got going, Walter thought

that I was all right on my own. One time, after I had gained momentum and thought I would be able to manage, I swerved and rode into a wooden fence. I fell off the bike and found myself on the ground feeling sore and foolish. Everyone was solicitous. I was helped up, and hobbled to the house with a bloody knee and scraped hand. The bicycle didn't sustain any injuries, and the fall didn't stop me. I persevered, and became very good at bike riding. I loved to take off, gaining speed and riding, feeling the wind caressing my face.

April was a month of several birthdays, including mine. We always looked forward to birthdays, as they were tied in with Hela's special cake for dessert. We always prepared a handmade card decorated and signed by everyone. Frau Doctor's birthday was also in April. We wanted to do something special for her, but didn't have any money to buy her a present on the black market. We had to think of something that we could make ourselves. I had an idea. I had learned how to make fabric boxes, which could be very pretty, if the fabric was attractive. Alicia had a piece of pretty pink satin, which she was willing to let us have. Making the box was a lot of work, but it was simple once it got under way. We cut out two identical cardboard shapes, one for the top and one for the bottom. A long, narrow strip was used for the sides of the box. They were covered with fabric, and lined with a different fabric. When it was sewn together it was a lovely box. We decorated it with a silk flower, a contribution from Lili. Frau Doctor was surprised and pleased with the gift.

Another gift for Frau Doctor, was a pretty pastel painting of flowers, delivered by the artist himself. It was from Mr. Fischel. The artist, whose name was Shalom, was well-known in the ghetto for his depictions of street scenes with emaciated people clad in rags. Shalom was an interesting man. He invited some of the girls to visit his studio, and while we were there, he asked me if I would pose for him. He wanted to paint my portrait. I couldn't say yes without Frau Doctor's permission. She didn't think it was a good idea, but the girls who were there, especially Lili, were as excited about the project as I was. They implored Frau Doctor to reconsider. She finally agreed to let me go on condition that I have a chaperone with me at each sitting.

The girls all wanted to accompany me. They took turns and the sittings went well. Soon we could see my face emerging on the canvas, but Frau Doctor had a change of heart, and I had to stop going. I never saw Shalom again and didn't have a chance to find out if he finished the portrait.

MAY 1944

Rumkowski came to see Frau Doctor after dinner one night. Oddly, he didn't stop to talk to us as he usually did, but went directly upstairs to Frau Doctor's room. What was so important? Curious, we were hovering near the dining room hoping that he would stop to visit with us on the way down. His conference with Frau Doctor didn't take long. Chatting amiably, they came down together heading for the dining room. Rumkowski seemed relaxed and in a good mood. He sat down at the table and asked us to join him. We all gathered around the table. Lili, who must have been taking a nap, came in as we were all seated. She stopped in the doorway trying to decide where to sit. Spotting her, Rumkowski waved to her to come over to where he was sitting and pointing to his lap, motioned for her to sit down.

Lili's face turned crimson. She loved it when he would ask her to sing, enjoying the special attention she got from him, but she was unprepared for his offer. She remained standing, looking confused. He motioned to her with his hand, pointing to his knee. After a moment's hesitation, she walked over and placed herself gingerly atop his knee. He embraced her with his arm to steady her, and asked,

"What do you have for me today?"

Lucy hesitated, still confused.

"Sing something! Sing! Go on!" he ordered.

She began to sing an aria from a Lehar operetta, quietly at first, but soon, carried away by the rhythm of the

song, got up and continued to sing, turning toward Rumkowski as though singing for him only. He was obviously enjoying the performance, a big grin covering his face. He stayed for almost an hour--a long time for someone as busy as he, while Lili was performing with her usual gusto.

After he left, Frau Doctor announced that Mr. Rumkowski told her that he had receive a thousand onion bulbs which have to be planted immediately. He would like all of us to help with the planting. The job will take a few days--a week at most. He hoped we will enjoy the experience; it will be a break in our routine.

"it will be nice for you to be outdoors." Frau Doctor paused and looked at us as though expecting some protests, or, at best, our grudging consent, but all of us were enthusiastic about the prospect of being outdoors for a whole week in the lovely spring weather--it seemed almost like a vacation. The following morning we walked together to the field, accompanied by Frau Doctor. The large area was enclosed by a barbed wire fence, through which we could see many rows of freshly turned earth. Several men were awaiting our arrival amid baskets of tiny orange-colored bulbs which were arranged in rows on the ground. One of the men showed us how to insert each bulb in the ground and cover it with earth. It seemed like an easy thing to do--we were anxious to start. It was easy at first, but after a while it turned out not to be easy at all. We had to kneel down to insert the bulbs in the earth, and had to move constantly on our knees as we went up and down the rows pushing the baskets ahead of us.

The bulbs, heated by the sun, emitted a tantalizing aroma. Unfortunately, we couldn't eat them. Some of us tried, the temptation was there, but the bulbs had a very sharp, acrid taste. They were impossible to swallow.

As the day progressed, it became very hot with the relentless sun was beating down on our unprotected heads. It was nice being outdoors, but the four days we had spent planting the onions seemed like the most difficult work I had ever done. We all felt the strain on our backs and by the time the long working day was over, we were exhausted. Planting onions turned out to be a very tedious job. To ward off the monotony we carried on conversations while we were working. One of the subjects that came up was the bulbs we were planting. We couldn't help wondering who the lucky recipients of the onions would be. There were ways in the ghetto to get extra food, as we well knew. Mr. Rumkowski's friends would have a windfall when these onions were fully grown.

About a week after we had finished planting, probably as a reward for the good work we had done, we were invited to visit Mr. Rumkowski and his wife at their Marysin home. The invitation, which came via Stasiek created a lot of excitement. We had never been to Rumkowski's house before, nor had we ever met his wife. On the appointed day, Rumkowski sent his carriage to pick us up. The driver had to come back twice to get us all there.

As head of the ghetto, Rumkowski enjoyed much more luxurious living quarters than the average ghetto dweller.

His house, which he occupied with his wife and his legally adopted son, Stasiek, had two levels and looked comfortable and well-furnished. We all gathered in the downstairs sitting room. Rumkowski's wife, a friendly, nice-looking woman who appeared to be much younger than her husband, engaged us in conversation, eliciting bits of information about ourselves in an easy-going, conversational manner. The highlight of the evening, however, was the real tea and delicious cookies that she served us. Although we didn't stay very long, the visit was very special for us, as we were allowed a glimpse into the lives of people whose importance in the ghetto was well established.

In the end, a bad fate awaited them when the ghetto was liquidated. Rumkowski, his wife, and Stasiek were sent to Auschwitz with the last transport from the ghetto. They all perished right after arriving there. The stories differ on how they died. One version, which had circulated after the war was over, was that several men who were sent to Auschwitz in earlier transports from the Lodz ghetto and worked at the crematoriums, were awaiting Rumkowski's arrival and made sure that he and his family did not get out of there alive.

JUNE 1944

Summer was almost here, the trees lush in their greenery again. In the streets of Marysin flowers were blooming already, transforming the streets with their beauty and aroma. We were having unusually hot weather for this time of the year, and we were spending a lot of our free time outdoors, enjoying the sun. I tried to ride the bicycle as much as time would allow. Riding the bike gave me a feeling of freedom; it let me forget who and where I was. The only thing that mattered was the ease with which I could control the bicycle and the speed I could attain. My lungs were filled with fresh air and it felt good while it lasted.

Conditions in the ghetto were worsening--food was more scarce and the air was charged with tension. We have been in the ghetto for four and a half years and while there was no hope that the conditions would improve, there was at last a shred of hope that the war would be coming to an end soon. Rumors abounded about Soviet advances into Poland. The boys would come back from work full of stories about Soviet victories. Even in our relative isolation we heard that the Germans were suffering great losses on the Eastern front, and that they were retreating from the territories they had conquered in the Soviet Union and Eastern Poland.

What would happen to us? Would the Germans let us survive the war, or would they do away with us before their defeat? These questions were coming up again and again, but noone seemed to know the answer.

In our house everything continued as usual. Frau Doctor

never discussed any of these issues with us and she was as cheerful as ever. Life had to go on. We still had our lessons with Dr. Kowalska, even though the warm weather made it hard to stay indoors, especially for the boys.

We continued to find solace in reading, borrowing books from friends and relatives. It was a great escape.

The girls moved back to their rooms in the spring. The small attic rooms with their tiny windows would be too warm in the summer. Again, the problem of where I would stay came up. Frau Doctor didn't think that it would be fair to me to have to share Dr. Kowalska's room. Besides, Dr. Kowalska bristled at the idea of my intrusion into her domain. In the end, Frau Doctor decided that I should remain with Mila and Renia, even though it meant less space for them--a sacrifice they agreed to make. A bed and a chest of drawers were squeezed into their pleasant, sunny room. I was happy with the outcome; I hoped that they were too. We had gotten to know each other over the winter and had become good friends.

One evening in June, when it was stifling, and the air seemed to be coming from a hot stove, the three of us couldn't fall asleep. We entertained ourselves by recalling funny stories and jokes.

A different kind of entertainment was provided, unwittingly, by Frau Doctor and Mr. Fishel. It was almost midnight when Lili came into our room to invite us to sleep on the balcony outside the room she shared with Inga. We were happy at the prospect of sleeping outdoors and gratefully

accepted. Passing Frau Doctor's room, Mila happened to glance at Frau Doctor's door, which had a windowpane on the upper part covered with a sheer curtain. In the dark room, lit by the full moon, she saw Frau Doctor and Mr. Fischel on the balcony, silhouetted in a close embrace. Mila nudged Renia and all three of us stopped in our tracks, instantly realizing that we shouldn't be seeing this.

We ran into Lili and Inga's room and collapsed on Inga's bed, trying hard to stop giggling. We were eliciting looks of surprise from both of them.

"Whatever happened to you,?" asked Lili, using the superior tone of voice which she usually reserved for the youngest among us.

"Quickly, go to the hallway and look into Frau Doctor's room--you will see what's so funny," Mila said, trying to sound serious. Both Lili and Inga went. Soon they returned, Lili, with a mock-serious expression.

"What's so funny about it? They are kissing, that's all. Haven't you ever seen anyone kissing? Now let's go to sleep."

But sleep didn't come for a long time; we were too excited to fall asleep. We spent what seemed like hours chatting and having fun "camping out" on the balcony. We vowed never to mention to anyone what happened that night.

I fully realized how childish our behavior was. I am sure that the others knew it too. It was just a tactic to stay afloat--a way of forgetting the past and not facing the future.

JULY 1944

Rumors continued to circulate about the Soviet army's advances on the Eastern front and their steady strides forward into Poland. Clandestine radio listeners were predicting an imminent takeover of our area by the Soviets. I fervently hoped that the Soviet armed forces would liberate us from the Germans before the Germans had a chance to kill us all!

Reports reached us about the liquidation of the ghetto. It was rumored that the entire ghetto population would be transferred to an unknown place, which some said would be a work camp. All too soon this proved to be true.

Rumkowski came to visit us one afternoon, looking tired and more stooped than usual, his expression grim. He gathered us all around him and proceeded to tell us about the upcoming evacuation of the Lodz ghetto, which was scheduled to start immediately.

We found out later, that the so called, "voluntary" transports to an unknown place, have been in effect since June. People were lured with promises of bettering their lives by leaving the ghetto. As an inducement, special rations of food were offered to those signing up.

Rumkowski explained to us that everyone would be transferred to a place similar to the ghetto, but further away from the front. There was no need to be afraid, he assured us; he would be leaving also, in the end. One of the boys asked him about remaining in the ghetto, hiding out, he had heard that some people were planning to do that.

With a pained expression, Rumkowski answered,

"This is, of course, an option that you might want to consider, but one that is fraught with danger. Remember, if the Germans would find you, it would mean certain death for all of you. They would not play around with those who disobeyed their orders. But, on the other hand, it might work out. You might be lucky. You might not be found and live to be liberated by the Russians. I cannot tell you what to do. If you should decide to leave the ghetto, don't wait till the last minute. Go soon. There will be an advantage to that. I have to stay here for the time being, but I, too, will leave. I will join you when I can."

After he finished, he got up and slowly walked to the door.

"Whatever you decide, I wish all of you lots of good luck," he added as he stood in the doorway. He walked down the few steps without looking back and got into his horse-drawn carriage. This was the last time we saw him.

We decided to take a vote. The majority, including Frau Doctor opted for relocation. There was no place to hide in our house--we would be discovered immediately, and we didn't know any safe places we could hide in till the Russians came.

There were things to prepare. Frau Doctor thought that each of us should have a strong canvas bag to take along with us, with a few personal necessities in it. We found some fabric and started to sew. Hela also had a lot to do. There was a quantity of flour and other staples that had

to be used up. She began to cook and bake. The last few weeks in the ghetto would be ingrained in my memory due to the increased amounts of food we were eating. In the midst of all that, I became sick with a stomach virus, suffering from weakness and high fever. I couldn't eat--the mere thought of food nauseated me. I could only look at the others enjoying their extra food. I was worried that if I was still sick on the day designated for our departure, I wouldn't be able to leave with the others.

Fortunately, after a few days I took a turn for the better and was able to join our group for the place where we had to await our deportation. We gathered at the large town square, which before the war was an outdoor market, called Balucki Rynek. When the ghetto was established, the buildings surrounding the square were transformed into German and Jewish ghetto headquarters. It was the place from which Rumkowski delivered many of his speeches. Now it was the place where we waited to be sent off to the unknown.

We remained at Balucki Rynek for about twenty-four hours, sitting on the ground, sweltering in the hot August sun, surrounded by masses of people. We still had some of the food that Hela had prepared before we left, so we didn't suffer from hunger.

The following day, our names were called and we were herded onto a train. It was a passenger train; we all sat together, alternately optimistic and pessimistic about the place the train was taking us to. We wanted to believe that we were going to a work camp, as promised, but realistically,

we were very scared of the unknown destination. When night came, we tried to sleep.

I lay awake in the crowded compartment, unable to fall asleep, worrying about what was going to happen to us next. I had a strange foreboding that my adopted family would not remain intact in the new place, wherever that turned out to be.

I wished I had somebody to talk to; I needed reassurance, but I knew that I couldn't get that from anyone. Besides, everyone around me seemed to be asleep. I shut my eyes tightly in an effort to sleep, when suddenly both my parents appeared before me, young and healthy looking, the way they looked before the war, and quietly they began to talk to me, assuring me that everything would be all right, that I had to be strong and keep up my good spirits--they would be with me all the time, wherever I go. Gradually, their low, measured voices lulled me to sleep. With one last effort, I tried to entreat them to stay, to let them know how much I needed them, but I couldn't find my voice. Something like a thick curtain was closing in around me, and then there was nothing.

AUGUST 1944

Our train came to a slow, grinding halt. The night had just begun to disappear, the black, velvety sky giving way to a lighter shade of royal blue. I looked out the train window to an eerie, unaccustomed sight; light beams criss-crossing the landscape forming rigid geometric figures against the darkness.

"Is this our destination? Is this where we get off?"

A senseless question--nobody knew the answer. This wasn't really a railroad station, no buildings, no town that I could see--not a landscape that evoked anything familiar. The train was shifting rails and suddenly, out of nowhere, scores of men clad in striped blue and gray uniforms resembling pyjamas, little round caps covering their closely shorn heads, appeared in front of the train.

"Is this a prison?" some asked one of the men in the striped uniforms. He looked at the questioner for a second, and moved on without answering.

A beam of light uncovered a row of German officers immaculately attired in SS uniforms as though for a parade; britches and riding boots, tight, well-fitting jackets, round, stiff officers' hats, riding whips in their hands. And dogs... So many dogs... It seemed like every other officer had a large German shepherd with him. How fitting.

Most people on the train were up now, getting ready to disembark, gathering luggage, putting on coats, wiping sleepy eyes after a night-long journey, making these little chores act as links between what was and what would be. We

had been promised work before we left the ghetto. "Yes," we were told, "you must relocate now, the ghetto is being dissolved, but you will be working, just like in the ghetto and you will stay together, whole families, do not fear." We had decided to go. We had no choice, anyhow.

Hela, our cook and her boyfriend, Jakob, decided to remain in the ghetto for the time being. Dr. Kowalska didn't go with us either. She was planning to join relatives.

"Heraus! Alle heraus!" The loud command shattered the stillness of the dawn. We filed out of the train.

"Schnell! Verfluchte!" ("Quick! Damned!")

We were pushed and shoved, told to line up in rows of five--men and women separately. The officers were in an awful hurry to get us moving. Soon we were on our way; women in one direction, men in the other. Inga, Renia, Mila and I and the two youngest ones, Alicia and Fredzia were still together. Frau Doctor and Lili were behind us, some distance away. By a strange coincidence (or perhaps not so strange), Mr. and Mrs. Fischel were in the same transport. We had seen Mr. Fischel and his wife, whom we had not previously met, at the gathering place in the ghetto. I recognized Mrs. Fischel in the row behind us now.

We started the march under the watchful eyes of the SS officers who prodded those lagging behind with their riding whips, their dogs running back and forth, alerting their masters by barking when someone fell down. We were half-running, trying not to fall behind, Alicia and Fredzia

doing their best to keep up with us. I was petrified of the dogs and their owners; their loud, threatening commands and this strange, unfamiliar place. Out of breath, I was running now, keeping pace with the moving sea of bedraggled humanity. We were following an unpaved country road--trees to the left, barbed wire to the right. Someone tripped and fell. An older woman. The barking of a dog, a gunshot, and the body was left behind to be trampled over by hundreds of hurrying feet, whose owners had only one objective--to keep up with the rest. We were still together, the six of us, breathing laboriously as we ran. The little bags, which each of us so carefully sewed and filled with a toothbrush, soap, a comb and a few other necessities were getting heavy, cumbersome.

"The sugar. Let's eat the sugar," I heard a whisper next to me. Incongruously, we were marching into Auschwitz, on the way to death perhaps, filling our mouths with the sugar that Hela doled out for each of us before we left the ghetto. Precious sugar. We couldn't bear to throw it away. But the sugar didn't give us the energy we needed to continue.

"The bags are too heavy, lets get rid of them," Renia whispered. One by one we dropped them to the ground.

I still didn't know where we were; I had never heard of Auschwitz before. I sensed that this place was different, that this was nothing like the ghetto we had left behind, as bad as it had been. They had lied to us--we would not live with our families, as they had promised us.

They had already separated the men from the women. Were we ever going to see the boys again?

Frau Doctor and Lili were not with us anymore. It seemed to me that they had decided to separate themselves from the rest of us. I was hoping that the six of us would be allowed to stay together.

We came to an abrupt stop in front of a large building. Awaiting us was a group of SS officers and some of the men in the grey and blue uniforms we had seen on our arrival. The officers quickly split our group in two. Some to the right, others to the left. Mila, Renia, Inga and I were on one side, the two younger ones, Alicia and Fredzia were directed to the other side. We were herded through an open door into a building. Inside, in a huge empty room we were given a command:

"Ausziehen, schnell!" ("Undress, quickly!")

I looked around. The room was teeming with men in the striped uniforms. We stood still. How could we undress in front of men?!

"Schnell, schnell," they kept yelling, repeating it in Polish. Timidly, we began to undress.

"Quickly!" They urged us. "Put your clothes on the floor. You are going into a shower."

We were pushed, naked, into the next room. As soon as the door closed behind us, showers of water started pouring on us from above, first ice cold, then scalding. We alternately shivered and retreated from the burning water which soon became ice cold again. There was no place to

hide. After what seemed like an eternity, the water was turned off. We were told to go into another room where more men in striped uniforms were waiting for us, scissors and clippers in hand, and our hair was cut off, crudely chopped off without regard, falling to the floor in big, wet chunks. I withdrew into myself, trying not to see, not to feel. What followed was even more frightening. With clippers they shaved our heads until no hair remained. All this was done with great speed, no more than five minutes to a person. They worked as if we were lifeless mannequins not live human beings.

Shorn, we were told to move into the next room, as others were taking our place. We looked at each other, the four of us. I could barely recognize my friends, they looked so different. We touched our bare heads and started to laugh, tentatively, but the laughter soon turned into tears.

What is happening? What are they doing to us?

"Let's stay together, whatever happens," Mila whispered, as if reading my mind. We shook our heads in silence.

Next we were directed toward what looked like a heap of rags and were told to line up. Each woman was handed a garment, without regard to size. We put on the raggedy dresses which clung to our wet bodies. We got no underwear, no shoes. We looked at each other in utter disbelief. These were total strangers we were seeing--there was no resemblance to our old selves. In the space of about one

hour, we have been completely transformed. Except for the eyes, perhaps, which were familiar, although seemingly much larger in our hairless heads. Looking at my friends, I saw the sheer terror in each pair of eyes. Suddenly, we were all crying. We moved close to each other for some measure of comfort and embraced, a torrent of tears running down our faces. We were still alive; we still could cry.

The stay in Auschwitz was a nightmare of stark, raging terror. To recall it in detail would be an exercise in self-punishment and futility. There were no details, only disjointed dream-like images, one following another, incongruous, unpredictable, wild and defying all previous experience. Nightmarish nights spent half dozing in the most grotesque positions, nights of suspended consciousness, not asleep, but not awake either, surrounded by strange shapes, bodies belonging to other human beings, warm and breathing and disturbing in their proximity. Mila, Renia, Inga and I kept as close to each other as we could, the knowledge that we had each other affording some degree of comfort in this horrific place.

Some of the women near us spoke a foreign language, a language I had never heard before, guttural and harsh. Someone asked them in Yiddish, "Where are you from?" and they answered that they were from Hungary. "We got here today," one said. They seemed as bewildered as we were, but temperamentally they were very different; loud and uninhibited, and much more talkative than the four of us. They reminded me of the Gypsies who would sing and dance in

the courtyards in Lodz before the war. They had the same dark, swarthy appearance.

The barrack where we spent most of the time was an enormous stable-like structure, lined on both sides with stall-like compartments separated by thick beams, each compartment almost big enough to hold a horse. This small area, about the size of a double bed, would hold twenty-five women, five across and five deep for a whole week, night and day, except for the twice-daily head counts outside. These rituals, called "Appels" were a very important part of concentration camp existence, we found out. First we were counted by the Block Leaders, called "Kapos" and then by the SS officers. If the count was for any reason inaccurate, as it sometimes was, we had to remain standing at attention until the reason for the discrepancy was found. The reason could be a woman too sick to get up and walk outside, or even, dead and no longer accountable. Some of the dead would be strung up on the electrified fences surrounding the camp. Newcomers to Auschwitz didn't realize that the barbed wire fences were electrified to prevent escapes. Others, who did know, found the wire an easy way to end their life. Death was quick, as there was always a shot fired by the SS guards to make sure that the offender was dead.

It was hard to get used to the screams of the dying and to the mad rantings of those driven insane by this inferno, but our bodies craved sleep more than anything else. We became inured to it as much as we could. I didn't

want to know anything, I just wanted to exist, to survive the stay here and leave this place reasonably intact. Rumors had it that we were to be sent to a concentration camp somewhere in Germany soon. These rumors kept us alive.

What passed for food here was something quite beyond description. A bitter ersatz tea at the dawn "Appel" and a swill masquerading as soup in the evening. Yet, starved as we were, we forced ourselves to swallow, gagging on the horrible taste.

Our "Kapo", or Block Leader, was a young Jewish woman from Poland, named Hanka. Hanka had a penchant for screaming at the top of her voice, which was deep and hoarse. She would walk around the barracks wearing long, flowing dressing gowns, incongruous in this setting. She was pretty and healthy looking. I wondered what she must have gone through to attain this high-ranking position. She lived in the barracks, but had a small compartment to herself, and was surrounded by several of her helpers. Hanka was not a sadist, as some "Kapos" were, but she assumed a tough, threatening stance. She always carried a stick, but I never saw her strike anyone. Most of the time she paced, giving out advice on how to behave in Auschwitz, freely interlaced with dire threats of punishment for any infractions of camp rules.

* * *

The selection for a concentration camp in Germany was fraught with trepidation for me, since I looked younger than my seventeen years. When the SS officer, who, we were later

told, was Dr. Mengele, asked me how old I was, I feared that this would be the end for me, afraid that he wouldn't believe that I was telling the truth. He stared at me, skeptically for what seemed like a long time, but couldn't have been more than a minute or two, and finally pointed me toward the group of women chosen for departure. Mila, Renia and Inga made it also. We were elated--we were leaving Auschwitz, this horrendous place, alive. We were so lucky!

After the selection, we weren't returned to our barrack; we were taken to a small building in a different part of the camp, where we were cleaned and decontaminated.

We spent the last night in Auschwitz in an open field, surrounded by SS officers and their dogs. It was a night I spent sleeplessly, shivering atop the damp, cold earth on which we lay in our flimsy dresses. I will never forget this frightening night; it dragged on and sleep didn't come.

I tried to recollect the past--to think about my life before the war--about my parents, but it didn't work. There were too many disturbances. The dogs barked at the slightest noise, although most women were quiet, afraid to talk in the proximity of the SS officers. I was hoping that this night would bring the end to the indignities which we had suffered in Auschwitz. But what came next was very scary.

At dawn, we were packed into cattle cars of a train, about fifty women to a car; an almost impossible situation. For three days and nights we were imprisoned on this train with hardly any food or drink, prostrated from the heat during the day and shivering from the cold at night, while

the train sped through the countryside taking us to an unknown destination. Time seemed to stand still; we lived only for the stops when the SS officers came to the door with a pail of water. The rest of the time we sat on the floor, with scarcely enough space even when our knees touched our chins. Tempers flared at times as some of the women tried to get close to the little window high above our heads to get a whiff of air during the heat of the day, when the car resembled a baker's oven. We were thirsting for water most of the time. Some women were sick and were crying or moaning night and day, while the wheels kept turning with a staccato sound as we traveled on and on.

Twice daily the train stopped and the SS officers opened the heavy sliding doors to bring us some water, and, occasionally, a piece of bread. They would also remove the pail of excrement that was always in the car.

There were times when the train would make extra stops, shifting rails or standing still for a while because of an air raid. The air raids became more frequent as we ventured farther away from Poland into Germany. We had no idea what direction the train was taking, but we knew that we were in Germany, as the signs of the little stations our train would pass had German names.

There was little conversation in our car during the three days we traveled together. We were too exhausted to talk. The only time someone would say something, was when another person would invade her space, or block the little window which was the only source of air. Sometimes I felt

that this journey would never end, that we would never reach our destination, but would all die in this train, from hunger, or heat, or thirst, but time passed and nothing changed, except the hunger and thirst got worse, the sick got sicker and we were getting weaker with every passing hour.

SEPTEMBER 1944

On the afternoon of the third day, the train came to an abrupt stop. A tall woman who was able to look out of the car's high little window informed us that we seemed to be in a harbor area--she could see ships and warehouses. Next she reported that several SS officers were gathering in front of our train. Soon the heavy sliding doors were being opened. We could breathe again. The air was cool and salty; we must indeed have been near the water. We were parched, we needed to drink desperately after three days of practically no water. I felt weak, I could barely stand, but this was no time to rest--the SS officers were everywhere, shouting at us, telling us to disembark, to hurry.

"Schnell, Schnell, Verfluchte Juden!" ("Quick, damn Jews")

As though anyone would like to spend another minute in that filthy car. We scrambled to get out, as fast as we could. Next we were told to line up in rows of five, and the ritual of counting heads began. We must have been all there, because it didn't take long, and soon we were led to a what looked like a warehouse. We ascended a staircase and entered an enormous room. The first thing I saw were showers right near the entrance. There were many of them and some were already spouting water. Precious water! I counted ten shower-heads in one long row, suspended over a long, white porcelain sink, and ten more on the other side. I ran to the water, trying to collect some in the palms of my hands, trying to drink, to get my face wet, to remove some of the

trying to drink, to get my face wet, to remove some of the grime that had accumulated in the three days on the train. When I was through washing, I looked into the adjacent room. There were many toilets inside lined up against the wall. White porcelain bowls flushing water. What luxury!

The rest of the huge room was filled with wooden bunks covered with coarse, grey blankets, under which there were mattresses. We each got a separate bunk, the four of us opting for upper bunks, so we could see each other. As soon as we settled down, there was an announcement that dinner was being distributed. It was done in an orderly way--we were called by bunks and lined up in front of a large aluminum vat. The soup was white, milky and sweet--pure ambrosia. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough to fill us up after our long journey, but there was nothing else. We were told to keep the bowls and spoons and admonished to look after them, as there would be no replacements. I licked the bowl clean and went to the showers to wash it, but once there I decided to wash myself as well--to feel the water running down my face again, getting it deliciously wet.

Back in my bunk I looked around to see if I could recognize anyone. Diagonally across from my bunk, on a top bunk I saw an attractive woman who looked vaguely familiar. She was looking in the direction of our bunks. After a few minutes, she introduced herself.

"I am Flora Fischel. You must be the girls who were adopted by Rumkowski, is that right? I know about you. My husband was a friend of Mrs. Stein, the lady who was

taking care of you."

We looked at each other not knowing what to say. This was an awkward situation. Finally, we nodded.

"Yes," Mila said, "he used to visit us sometimes and play the piano. He played the piano real well."

We didn't know what else to say. Later, after talking it over, we decided to stay away from Mrs. Fischel.

The gong sounded early the next morning. It was time to get up; we were going to work. A quick splash of water on my face and hands and I was ready to go. Dressing didn't take much time as we only had the dresses to slip into. In the front of the room, ersatz tea and a slice of bread were being distributed. After a few minutes we were told to go downstairs and line up outside, five to a row. A careful head count was made and we started the march to our workplace. We still didn't have any shoes and walking barefooted on the broken pavement was difficult. The German soldiers who were guarding us kept admonishing us to walk quickly. Most of them were middle-aged men who were members of the "Wehrmacht", the regular army.

During the march to work, we noticed signs indicating that we were in Hamburg, a major city and harbor in North Germany. On the way, we passed a huge amount of rubble and many burned out or damaged buildings. We were later told by one of the soldiers, that about a month prior to our arrival, Hamburg experienced the worst Allied bombing of the entire war. Large sections of the city were on fire, even sidewalks were burning after three days of uninterrupted assaults from

the air.

Our group of five hundred women had been divided into smaller groups before we set out for our place of work. Once there, we were told that we would clean the rubble from a bombed railroad station. We had to lift heavy chunks of concrete and forming a chain, pass the debris to where it would be piled onto lorries--open wagons that ran on rails, to be carted away. The work was very hard, but fortunately for us, the autumn weather was pleasantly warm. We had to work very fast, there was no chance to slow up, as the whole chain depended on each person. The soldiers constantly yelled at us to keep going, to work faster,

"Do it quick," they admonished us, "You cannot stop, or you'll be punished," their tough expressions convincing us that they meant it.

At the stroke of noon we were told to stop. It was lunchtime. Soup was brought out in large vats, and as we formed a line, it was quickly laddled out. We got vegetable soup which was very tasty. Half an hour later one of the soldiers blew his whistle and it was back to work again. The workday was long and our walk back to the warehouse was slower than the morning walk. We were tired after a whole day of hard work and didn't have the energy to walk fast. Our guards didn't speed us on this time. Maybe they were tired as well.

I was very hungry and was looking forward to the evening meal. The vats were waiting for us as we entered the warehouse. The memory of the thick soup of the day

before lingered, but this soup was thin and golden brown. My friends and I carried it to our bunks and climbed up carefully. The first spoonful alerted me that there was something wrong with the soup. It was so spicy that it was impossible to swallow it. Yet, this was the only food we would be getting till tomorrow. I tried another spoonful. I had to force myself to swallow it, the hot soup burning my mouth and throat. I knew I couldn't continue eating it, in spite of my hunger. Was this a cruel joke? Voices were heard all over the room as people started to eat, only to find out that the soup was inedible.

"How could they do this to us? The dogs. Did they do it on purpose? This is impossible to eat! I see some seeds in it--it must be the pepper they used."

There were seconds to be had, but there were no takers. The pepper soup appeared on our dinner menu at least twice more while we stayed at the warehouse.

Hungry and tired I fell asleep almost the instant the lights were turned off. I was deep in dreams when I was awakened by an unfamiliar sound. As often happened when I woke up in the middle of the night, I had to orient myself to where I was. I opened my eyes. I was high on a bunk; everyone around me seemed to be asleep. The room was almost completely dark except for a few dim lights scattered along the ceiling. But the sound persisted. It was a scratching sound, unfamiliar to me, coming from behind me. I sat up, startled, to see what it was. Faintly, I could make out an outline of a fairly big animal on the headboard of my bunk,

gnawing away on something--probably the wood. At first I thought it was a cat, but as my eyes grew accustomed to the dark, I realized that it must be a rat. A huge rat--an animal I had no personal experience with in the past. Involuntarily, I let out a scream. Inga, who was sleeping on the bunk next to mine was too deep a sleeper to hear anything, but from farther away, Renia woke up and asked me what was the matter.

"A rat," I managed to say through my chattering teeth. "What can I do?"

"Come down. Quickly." She instructed me. As I landed on the floor, we both saw the rat scurrying away along the wall. I was shaking, and so was Renia, but what was there to do? We didn't want to wake up anybody else, so the two of us decided to try to go back to sleep. I climbed back up to my bunk and put my head in the opposite direction, away from the wall. It was just another obstacle to overcome. As I was falling asleep again, I was hoping that the rat wouldn't make a repeat appearance. He didn't. At least not to my knowledge.

On the way to work, some of the soldiers would at times engage in conversation with the person walking on the outside. One of them started to talk to Inga and it turned out that he, like Inga was from Berlin. From that day on he would try to walk near her, talk to her, and sometimes slip her a sandwich. One day, after a long conversation with the soldier, who was a middle-aged man, Inga excitedly whispered to the three of us,

"I have something to tell you. I'll see you at lunch."

We took our soup to a fairly secluded grassy area. Inga was bursting with the news she wanted to share with us.

"He wants to smuggle me out of here and hide me with a family he knows. He already spoke to them and they agreed to keep me till the end of the war. The Germans are losing on all fronts. He thinks we will be free in a few months. The only problem is my hair, or the lack of it. That would arise suspicion. They would have to get a wig for me. Then they could explain me to their friends as a relative who is visiting from Berlin.

We were stunned. Giving a Jewish girl a sandwich was one thing, but giving her shelter, helping her escape from a concentration camp was quite another. This was very exciting news; we could hardly believe what we heard. Inga was worried about the risk involved. She asked us what we thought. Should she do it? We tried to convince her that the risk wasn't really that great. She didn't look at all Jewish and her German was pure Berlin. We realized that once she was reported missing, The Germans would conduct a very thorough search, but unless the soldier confided in someone, it would be very hard to trace it to him. Deep down, we had some misgivings, but Inga was so happy, we didn't want to say anything to spoil it for her. There were still details to be worked out. In addition to the wig, she needed some clothes and papers. They would have to wait for the right

moment. Nothing could be overlooked--it had to be perfectly planned in order to work.

The rest of the week dragged. Finally Monday came. This was the day when Inga would find out exactly how and when she would leave. The wake-up gong rang, its ear-shattering sound invading our sleep. It was always so difficult to wake up in the morning and relinquish the world of dreams for the dreary reality. Today, however, we got up eagerly, remembering that this would be a big day for Inga.

The time to leave for work came, but the usual "Appel" call did not. We waited impatiently, wondering about the delay. Finally, the head of our floor, a female SS officer came in and announced,

"Take everything with you today. you are moving to a different camp. Line up outside--we will be leaving in fifteen minutes."

Outside, we lined up for the head count amid excited whispers, nervous queries and speculations. Nobody knew anything, but trucks were lined up in the street and we were told to climb onto them for the ride to the new camp. None of the old soldiers who guarded us for the past few weeks were in sight. What did that mean? We were afraid to talk about Inga's situation, for fear that someone might overhear us, but we could see how upset she was.

The ride didn't take long. The trucks stopped in a countrified area surrounded by barbed wire. Through it, we could see barracks, some large, some quite small. The gates opened and the trucks drove into the camp. A large number

of SS officers, men and women, awaited our arrival. We were told to get off the trucks and assemble in a large square surrounded by barracks. A much-decorated officer in a smart SS uniform and riding boots announced that he would be the head of the camp, called Concentration Camp Sasel. The camp was located near the village of Sasel. We would be working outside the camp. Any transgressions against the rules of the camp, especially attempts at escape, would be met with severe punishment. He then called on one of the women officers, a tall, buxom, tough-looking blonde, whom he called Frau Miller. She reiterated some of the camp rules in a deep, nasty voice and announced that she would select some women for a variety of jobs within the camp.

A lot of pushing forward ensued. Some of the women managed to find a place up front, near the SS officer, Frau Miller, who selected ten women to work in the kitchen. Our acquaintance, Flora Fischel, whom we so studiously avoided in Hamburg, was given the job of supervising the kitchen staff. She spoke some German, and with her tall figure and erect posture, she was the image of a competent and responsible person. Next, the SS officer selected two women to work in the dressmaking shop and one shoemaker. One young woman who responded to the call for a nurse, was chosen to assist the camp doctor, who was from Czechoslovakia. The doctor and two Czech "Kapos" had arrived in the camp a day before our arrival. A third "Kapo" was chosen from our group. She was a young, nice-looking woman, named Mirka, whom we knew by sight from the Hamburg camp. Mirka was the only inmate

from Lodz to hold such a responsible job. We got to know her quite well during our stay at Sasel; A quick-witted, intelligent young woman, she was full of nervous energy. Somehow, she managed to act as an intermediary between the SS personnel and the inmates without offending anyone; a very difficult task.

Of the Czech "Kapos", the one named Gerda turned out to be a terror; she was as bad or worse than the SS women. Huge, about six feet tall, weighing most likely over two hundred pounds, she looked more like a man than a woman, her straight black hair cut short, her cruel brown eyes protruding from her pudgy, moon-shaped face like two buttons.

The other "Kapo," Frieda, was smaller, with longish blond wavy hair. She was not as nasty as Gerda, although the two of them seemed to be good friends. We never found out if they were Jewish, but the doctor, whose name was Zahn, was.

The four of us did not land any jobs within the camp, and neither did we get to live in any of the small barracks, but in the largest one in the camp, which housed one hundred women. I guess we weren't aggressive enough. We did manage to get upper berths again, most likely because they weren't in great demand, so that in the evenings, before falling asleep, we could talk to each other. Two sisters, Ela and Pola Heller, who occupied the two upper berths adjoining Renia's, were very congenial and loved to reminisce about the way things were before the war. In their thirties, they

had much more to contribute than we did, especially when it came to food, our favorite topic. Mila, Renia and I loved to talk about chocolates. Inga, having come from Germany, had a different frame of reference.

We would name a favorite chocolate bar and ask the Heller sisters if they knew it, which, of course, they did. They, in turn, would ask us,

"Do you remember the very dark, semi-sweet chocolate that one used to be able to buy by weight?"

"Well, the best bittersweet chocolate was made by Suchard's."

"Oh, no, it was definitely made by Wedel."

"How about Pischinger's milk chocolate," one of the sisters would chime in, "I can still feel its taste in my mouth. Remember how it melted on your tongue?"

My tongue was dry from the salty, watery soup we had for dinner, and the memory of all the goodies from before the war, their different wrappings, boxes, foils and shapes, made my stomach grumble. But we couldn't give up the memories, because these things did exist at one time, and yes, I hoped they would exist for us again some day.

OCTOBER 1944

Our work details varied, but the majority of women worked outside the camp. Renia, Mila, Inga and I were selected for a job in Poppenbuettel, a nearby village, where small prefabricated houses were being built for German families whose homes were destroyed by Allied bombs. The work site was only a few kilometers from our camp, and we walked to work in rows of five, accompanied by SS guards. Once on the job, we were divided into small groups, each supervised by a German civilian "Meister" (foreman). Every group was assigned particular tasks, such as carrying the heavy slabs of concrete of which the houses were built, or carrying and loading debris to lorries and pushing them to a dumping ground, a job similar to the one we had been doing in Hamburg.

Our group consisted of twelve women. We were supervised by a man named Knapp. Herr Knapp would arrive at work every morning on his bicycle. As a civilian, he didn't have any special privileges, especially since he wasn't a member of the Nazi party. He reported to the head of construction, a nasty man, always looking for pretexts to punish us. He was a member of the Nazi party, to which the button he wore on his lapel attested.

We soon found out that Herr Knapp was a decent man, who didn't scream at us like some of the other foremen did, but explained patiently what our jobs entailed. We were eager to do the best work we could, because we liked Herr Knapp, but also because not doing a good job was usually

met with punishment.

About a week after we started working for Herr Knapp, he arrived on his bicycle in the morning, as usual, but in the back of the bike, in the wire basket, there was a large enameled pot, tightly covered and secured with a string. One of the women asked him what was in the pot. Herr Knapp was silent for a few minutes while he untied the pot and put it on his desk.

"This is soup for your lunch. My wife cooked it. You girls don't get any lunch here, so at least you'll have something."

He said it in a matter-of-fact, off-hand voice, as though this was something he would ordinarily do. We knew that there was an element of risk for him in doing this. He had to be careful, because his job, or even more would be at stake if he were found out.

Before leaving for work in the morning, we each got a small piece of bread and a cup of ersatz tea for breakfast. It was up to us to save the bread, if we wanted to have it for lunch. Most of us didn't do that. There wasn't enough bread for two meals, so it was better to have it in the morning and go hungry the rest of the day than to have a few crumbs twice a day.

When our lunch break came that day, Herr Knapp heated up the soup for us on the pot-bellied stove in his office. The soup was wonderful. It was thick and flavorful, full of potatoes, carrots and cabbage. It really made a difference to have a meal at midday, but Herr Knapp told us that he

could do it only once a week. From that day on, Wednesday was our soup day. The soup break gave us a chance to talk with Herr Knapp while we ate. We were reluctant at first to ask him any personal questions, but gradually we did, as he was friendly and easy to talk to. One day, one of the women in our group asked him,

"Have you served in the army, Herr Knapp?"

His reply was revealing.

"I did not qualify because I had an injury from a construction job. It made me very happy. I had no desire to fight Hitler's war. I was never a Nazi sympathizer and was a member of the Socialist Party before the war started. I am lucky that I wasn't punished for it."

In spite of the hard work, we were content with the job in Poppenbuettel, mostly because of the humane treatment we received from Herr Knapp. But the job was finished before the winter and our next job was in Hamburg. To get there, we had to take a train. For the first time we actually came in contact with a large number of German civilians while we were waiting for the train. There were always a lot of them on the platform; some men, most of them middle-aged, or older, but women predominated, young and old. Some of them would stare at us, remarking out loud about our shabby clothes, the big yellow stars on our coats and our closely cropped hair.

A bonus from these trips was the ability for us to see headlines of the newspapers that the commuters were reading. In October 1944, the news from the front was not good for

Germany, and the newspapers reflected it. We could not react to what we saw, openly, but inwardly, those of us who gleaned some of the headlines, had an infusion of hope that the monstrous reign of Adolf Hitler was coming to an end. Back in the barracks in the evening, we discussed the good news of Hitler's losses with glee.

It was very important for us to get enough sleep. Sleep was restorative and necessary, in order for us to be able to carry out the difficult labor that was expected of our tired bodies every day. Under normal conditions these jobs were performed by men--most of the time men trained in the building trades, strong, well-fed and suited for the job. We were subsisting on next to nothing. And yet, we had to perform these jobs because we had no choice; our lives depended on our ability to work.

Sleep came easy. Exhaustion set in early in the evening after the meager dinner, which invariably was a bowl of watery soup. Lights in the barracks were turned off early, because we had to get up before dawn to start the next day's labors. After dinner my friends and I usually spent some time discussing the happenings of the day, but when the lights were turned off, the talk subsided almost instantly. I tried to set set aside a few minutes to reminisce, recalling pleasant times spent with my parents; things we did together and the fun I had doing them.

One of my favorite activities with my parents was going to the movies. By the time I was ten I was already a movie buff. I collected movie programs and often bought a movie

magazine called "Kino." Most of the movies I saw with my parents were American. My mother loved musicals, especially those with Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy. Father liked opera and tried to see movies featuring opera singers, particularly ones with the Italian tenor, Beniamino Gigli. Opera movies were usually Italian. He also liked American gangster movies. Poland had its own small movie industry. I saw several Polish movies that dealt with adult themes, as there were no restrictions for children.

In Poland, we used to celebrate Child's Day every year. Our school would always have some special treat for us. Whenever possible, we were taken to the movies. I saw some of the Shirley Temple movies on those occasions. They were my favorites. I loved Shirley Temple; she was so talented; I found it hard to believe that someone so young could do all the things she did.

Other activities I recalled fondly, were trips with my father, usually on Saturdays when he wasn't working. Father was a health nut--he enjoyed trying new foods if they had some health value. He introduced us to grapefruits which were not widely available at the time. Sometimes we would go to a health store to buy yet another kind of honey or some new vitamins. Mother preferred more conventional foods, enjoying a piece of cake or torte. My parents were both slim, and I, a poor eater, was always thin. It was also comforting to recall times spent marketing with Mother. I missed my parents, but the hurt was assuaged somewhat by the knowledge that here, in camp, I was no different from the

majority. Only a few of the girls' mothers were in camp with them. Many of them lost their parents after arrival at Auschwitz.

Most of the five hundred women in Sasel were young, their ages ranging from fifteen, to close to fifty. Some of them had one or more sisters in camp. It was easier to survive the daily hardships if one had a relative, or even a friend. Mila, Renia, Inga and I helped each other by just being there when needed. On those rare occasions when one of us got some extra food, we tried to share it. It wasn't a common thing for any of us to get something other than our daily ration of food, but when we worked in places which were in close proximity to private houses, we would be noticed by the German women who lived in them. Sometimes, they would inconspicuously leave a sandwich, an apple, or a potato on the ground. If others also noticed the food, a near riot would break out as they fought to get it. Occasionally, the food was placed in such a way that only one of us would see the package and pick it up without attracting attention. It was at those times that we were able to share the food in the comparative privacy of the barracks.

I recall a time when a good soul put a few raw potatoes near our work station. I think it was Inga who was able to pick them up and hide them in one of her pockets. Although potatoes in camp were sometimes eaten raw, we decided to save them for when we returned from work and try to cook them on the pot-bellied stove in the barracks. The atmosphere there was friendlier and the stove was occasionally used to

cook a scrap of food picked up somewhere. We had no cooking utensils, the food had to be cooked in the metal bowl that each of us had. That bowl was an indispensable part of our camp existence. Without it we wouldn't have been able to collect our soup. We guarded our bowls assiduously; we wore them attached to our person around the waist, using a piece of string or rag to secure it.

NOVEMBER 1944

With the cold weather, it became very difficult to spend the day at work in our light clothes. When we first arrived at Sasel we were given used shoes, most of them flimsy and unsuitable for all the walking we did. They also gave each of us one pair of underpants and the blue and gray striped concentration camp inmates' dresses that we first encountered in Auschwitz. We didn't have any coats. On rainy days we would get thoroughly soaked during our long walks to and from work.

The shoes I got were woefully inadequate. They were flimsy sandals and one day they just fell apart. I had no choice but to walk barefoot. I tried wrapping rags and papers around my feet, but that didn't work too well. I caught a cold and felt miserable for a few days, aching all over and coughing a lot. Finally, I decided to go to the infirmary after dinner one evening. There were several women waiting to be seen by the doctor. In the meantime, the nurse, Zosia, a pretty, blue-eyed blonde who was later to become a close friend, took our temperature. Though I had a sore throat and felt feverish, I wasn't hopeful that I would be allowed to stay in the infirmary, which was very small and could only accommodate about twenty women out of the five hundred in the camp.

Luck must have been with me that evening, because the doctor, after examining my chest and throat, told me that I would be staying in the infirmary. I was happy at first, but later became apprehensive, worrying that I might be

seriously ill and would require a long stay. It was a known fact that several women had tuberculosis, and were sick enough to be held in the infirmary since the day of our arrival in Sasel. There was always the fear that the Germans might send the sick women to a different camp, or do away with them altogether.

As Zosia was showing me to my berth, I felt very shaky about staying in the infirmary, but it was too late now for second thoughts. I climbed up to the upper berth and put on the gown that Zosia gave me. When she came back with medication, I asked her if I was very sick.

"Oh, no, you have bronchitis. You will be better soon. You were really lucky that there was room for you tonight. Sometimes the doctor has to turn away women with high fever, because there's no space for them. You will probably stay only one day, so make the best of it. Try to relax and rest."

I was beginning to feel better already. The evening went by fast, spent talking to a couple of the women about our respective maladies and symptoms to the accompaniment of coughing and moaning of the seriously ill. Oddly, the young girls who had tuberculosis were not emaciated, skeleton-like creatures. They actually looked healthier than the rest. But when I mentioned this to Zosia, she smiled.

"Their cheeks are rosy from the constant fever they have. It's one of the symptoms of their disease."

One of the women had pneumonia. She seemed to be in bad shape, coughing a lot and crying out in pain. I spent a

restless night, waking up several times when the light was turned on by the nurse coming in with medication. I was also bothered by my own coughing, which had awakened me a few times.

The following morning I was feeling much better and tried to relax and enjoy the luxury of bed rest. When the doctor examined me she told me that I was improving and wouldn't be staying in the infirmary another night. Because I didn't have shoes, she signed me up for one day of kitchen duty. That would give me a chance to stay in camp an extra day, instead of having to walk to work barefooted.

The kitchen duty turned out to be a break, although I spent the whole day sitting on a hassock peeling potatoes. We were all given a hearty soup for lunch, not the watery kind that we got for dinner. No wonder the girls who worked in the kitchen looked so good. Mrs. Fischel, our old acquaintance, was very much in evidence in the kitchen, supervising the staff and giving orders. She recognized me immediately and said hello. She seemed to be thriving on her job, which also included cooking for the German staff. Mrs. Fischel was a good-looking woman, her newly-grown curly black hair framing a pretty face and lively, black eyes. I thought that we had made a mistake when we turned away from her in Hamburg. She would have been a good person to know. She probably wanted to be friendly with us because she didn't know anyone else. It was too late now. She didn't need us anymore.

After I left the infirmary, I got a pair of shoes on

the recommendation of the doctor. The shoes weren't very comfortable for walking, because the soles were made of wood, but they were much warmer than my open sandals and a great improvement over walking barefoot in the rough, northern climate of Hamburg.

Our clothes, or lack of them, became a constant subject of conversation. We suffered greatly from the cold without any outerwear. We didn't know whether we would get winter coats at all, but one evening in mid-November, after the nightly "Appel," the head of the camp, Herr Hauptmann, as he preferred to be addressed, announced that we would be given winter coats that evening. He snapped his fingers at one of SS women officers. She went into the dressmaker's barrack and came out soon followed by the two dressmakers and the three Kapos all carrying armloads of coats.

Herr Hauptmann had a list with our names in his hand and started calling us in alphabetical order. The procedure went quickly. As soon as a woman stepped forward, he picked up a coat and threw it at the recipient without regard to size. There was no recourse.

The SS women standing guard were hurrying us along. The four of us were, as usual, together. Inga, whose last name started with an A, got her coat very soon. It was a beautiful coat. A princess-style of dark green wool, it was form-fitting on top and flaring out below the waist. The tall Inga looked terrific in it and was very happy. Like all the other coats, however, it was marked by large Stars of David appliqued in the front and back of the coat.

Not everyone was lucky with what they got. When Renia got hers, she tried it on and started to cry. Her coat was made of thin, black fabric, in a style usually worn by old ladies. It reached down to her ankles. She could do nothing about it, though.

I was waiting impatiently for my turn to come. When my name was called, Herr Hauptmann picked a coat and threw it at me. I caught it and thanked him. It was a brown and beige herringbone tweed coat made of heavy woolen cloth. It looked very warm and I was glad I got it. The coat fit me well, but was much too long. When I inspected it in the barracks later on, it occurred to me that I could try to borrow a needle and scissors from the dressmaker and shorten the coat. From the leftover material I could make a hood, which would protect my head from the cold. The dressmaker lent me a needle and scissors. The hood kept my head warm all winter.

Mila's coat was almost the same as Renia's. It was also black and of thin fabric, and looked enormous on the petite Mila. The two of them looked like leftovers from a costume party. Inga and I burst out laughing, but our laugh soon subsided. We felt sorry for them. What were they going to do? These coats were not suitable for the kind of work they were doing. Mila and Renia looked at each other in despair.

"We have to do something. Let's talk to someone about it," Mila whispered.

They knew better than to talk to the SS officers. The

women were a cruel lot and would most likely give them a slap in the face for daring to ask. They decided to talk to the "Kapo," Mirka.

"Mirka, look at us. We won't be able to work in these coats; they are so long."

Mirka was sympathetic to their problem, but she knew that she couldn't approach Herr Hauptmann now. It was late and he was becoming edgy.

"Not now. Go to your barracks. Quick!"

The four of us walked to the barracks together, Inga and I happy with our coats, Mila and Renia crying. We sat down on our bunks in silence.

A few minutes later, the hoarse voice of Mirka could be heard over the din of conversation.

"Where are the two girls who got the black coats?"

Mila and Renia grabbed their coats.

"Here we are, Mirka," they shouted in unison.

"Come with me. I spoke to the dressmaker. We'll find something for you."

A short while later they were back, clutching their new coats. Mila got a light blue wool coat and Renia a brown one. They were overjoyed.

Looking at our new coats, spread out on top of our bunks, I thought of the women to whom these coats had once belonged. These unknown benefactors who may have perished in German concentration camps have given us a better chance of surviving the cold winter in this faraway, unfriendly place.

It was late; it was time to sleep now. We could sleep easier tonight knowing that we had a warm coat to shield us from the cold. The next morning when the wake-up gong sounded, there seemed to be more energy than usual in our large barrack. The women seemed more alert, eagerly inspecting their new coats, dressing quickly and with more vigor. At the morning appel, we were a colorful group, the coats making a multihued pallette. There was less restlessness and less shivering while we were waiting in line for the morning ration of the hot liquid and bread. The march to work seemed faster as well, more purposeful. It was cold, as usual, but we had our coats to keep us warm.

Now that I had a coat I had a great yearning to have a bra. It became a fixation. I thought of it constantly. I knew that the only way was to make one myself. I felt that I could do it. But how would I get the fabric? The thread? I decided to talk to the dressmaker. She was a nice person, she might help me. And indeed, she did. She gave me a piece of cotton fabric and lent me a pair of scissors and a needle again. It was Sunday, so I had the time. I started my project right away. I had never worn a bra before. At seventeen, I still didn't need one, but I thought that I would be warmer wearing a bra.

I spent the rest of that Sunday sewing, using thread unravelled from the fabric. When I was finished, I had a bra that fit quite well. My friends, who were watching me sew it, were impressed with the result. I was too.

DECEMBER 1944

In mid-December, Camp Sasel was to undergo a thorough cleaning. We had to give up our free time one Sunday to do the work. We thought that it was because of Christmas, but our "Kapo", Mirka, told us that we were going to be visited by a delegation from The International Red Cross. The camp commander, whom we knew as Herr Hauptmann, wanted Sasel to look like a model camp. We worked feverishly, scrubbing the wooden floors in the barracks, cleaning the outhouses and putting finishing touches on the camp grounds so that not one speck of paper was visible anywhere. Our breakfast that day was better than usual--we got some Limburger cheese with our morning bread ration--the first time we got cheese in camp. While the smelly cheese wasn't a great favorite, it was devoured nonetheless.

Camp Sasel was better organized than the warehouse in Hamburg, where we spent the first three weeks, but I missed the amenities we had there. Gone were the indoor toilets and showers. Here we had outhouses which were not pleasant and not always clean. For washing, there was an unheated shed, where cold water had to be fetched and poured into a pan. We were supposed to go to the shed every morning to wash, but it was much too cold for a thorough washing, so we just washed our face and hands and left the more complete cleaning for Sundays, when it was possible to heat some water on the pot-belly stoves in the barracks. There was always a long wait, but it was worth it. The warm water was used afterwards to wash the single pair of panties and socks we

had. The dresses we wore were much too heavy to be washed; they would never have been dry by the next day.

On that particular Sunday, we were told to take special care with our appearance, as the Red Cross delegation would be paying attention to such details. We did the best we could with what we had. Somewhere around noon, the delegation arrived. This being so close to Christmas, the speculation was that the Red Cross delegates would come bearing gifts of food for us. The group that arrived inspected the camp quickly, stopped to speak to some of us while we stood in our usual formation around the camp square, and, on leaving, gave out several toothbrushes. I was one of the recipients. Since we had no toothbrushes, those who got one were glad, but there was a general disappointment that the members of the Red Cross didn't find it necessary to help where it would have counted most. We were starving and needed food. Instead, they gave the Germans a compliment for running a clean concentration camp. My faith in the Red Cross was shattered after that incident.

Herr Hauptmann usually made himself scarce on Sundays, but he was there on the occasion of this special visit, bedecked with all his ribbons and medals and looking spiffy. He appeared to be quite pleased with the Red Cross visit; they must have praised him for the good job he was doing.

On ordinary days, his main function was to appear at the twice-daily head counts, at which he presided. A tall, dapper man, who most likely had spent some time in active military duty and considered this assignment a lark, he was

well-groomed and always carried a riding stick to complement the britches and riding boots he wore. He used the riding stick to wave it in front of our faces, sometimes striking an individual with it, but he rarely lost his temper, or screamed. He accomplished what he wanted quietly, his demeanor polite and, at times, even jocular. Occasionally, he would call out our names and would make a joke when a particular name struck his fancy. Once, reading my name he called me Marusha Kochana (Marusha was a Russian girl's name and kochana, Polish for dear, or beloved).

He would even exchange a few words with an inmate when he felt like it. One of the young women he spoke to a couple of times was a pretty, petite one, named Rysia, who was quick-witted, well-educated, and spoke German fluently. He seemed to be impressed by her knowledge of the language. After one of the conversations he had with her, which consisted of him asking questions and Rysia answering in German, he pronounced Rysia to be "Ueberrasching intelligent" (astonishingly intelligent). The SS women didn't care for that kind of a description of a Jew. When they came across Rysia alone, they would find ways to torment her, or seek her out for especially unpleasant chores.

Right after Christmas Herr Hauptmann was replaced by a new camp commander, an Oberscharfuehrer of the SS, who was big and tough, and had no qualms about screaming or hitting us whenever he felt like it. His was a reign of terror.

Among the officers assigned to our camp, there seemed to be a hierarchy. The female SS officers outranked the

men, who were, on the whole, older. The women were a cruel lot, screaming incessantly and hitting us for the slightest reason, or for no reason at all. It was safer to avoid them whenever one could, especially on Sundays, when they delighted in finding chores for us to perform. Anyone who was outside would sooner or later be grabbed by one of them for a job that had to be done right away. Nor were we safe from them in the barracks; if they couldn't fulfill their quota, they would enter the barracks and select their victims for the work they wanted done. We dreaded being picked for outdoor work on the only day when we could find a modicum of time to wash our clothes and ourselves, but the SS women were relentless.

* * *

On Christmas Day we didn't go to work, but the female SS officers were on the lookout for people to do chores. It was my lot to be caught, together with three other women. We were taken to an area adjacent to the camp, right outside the barbed wire, given shovels and told to clear a path to a little house in the wooded area surrounding the camp. It had been snowing and the tiny house looked like it belonged to the witch from "Hansel and Gretel." In a short time we finished our task and were standing, uncertain what to do next. The SS officer was nowhere to be seen. As we were trying to decide if we should walk back to the camp, the door of the little house was opened by an elderly, gray-haired woman who beckoned us to go inside. We found ourselves in a tiny kitchen, the center of which was taken up by a table

bedecked in a red and green tablecloth. On the table was a plate of what looked like roast meat. The woman pointed to the plate.

"Essen sie doch," she said and disappeared. She told us to eat, but was it a trick to get us to do something that we'd be punished for later? It didn't take us long to make a decision. Hunger prevailed, and the smell of the meat was invading our nostrils. We each grabbed a piece of the unfamiliar meat and devoured it in minutes. We left the house without seeing its occupant again and within minutes of the return of the SS officer. One of the women, who was from Germany, told us that the delicious meat was called "Hasenpfeffer," or rabbit stew.

Was it Christmas spirit that prompted the old woman to feed us? Or had she been watching us come and go all these months and pitied the inmates of the concentration camp in her backyard? Who was she, anyway, and what was she doing living there? I never found out, but if the woman was a witch, she was a good witch indeed.

JANUARY 1945

There was an air raid one day while we were walking to work in Hamburg. We were in an open area amid ruins of bombed out buildings. There was no air raid shelter anywhere near. One of our SS guards announced loudly that we would stop where we were for the duration of the air raid. Our guards immediately scattered and cowered close to the ground, while we remained standing in the bright sunlight, with our heads up, marveling at the silver strips falling from heaven. We had never seen them before and had no idea that they were anti-flak devices dropped by Allied planes. Every time I heard the sound of a bomb exploding on hitting the ground, I was silently celebrating, as, I was sure, the other women were. For us, these bombs meant that we were getting closer to the end of this dreadful period.

The air raids became more and more frequent. Often it was necessary for us to go to a public air raid shelter while we were at work or en route. These shelters were usually full of Germans and our motley group inevitably attracted attention. Perhaps it was again the stars of David on our coats, or our closely cropped, just-growing-in hair, but mainly, I suspect, it was because we were accompanied by SS officers. We could tell that we were the subject of conversations, but it was done in a subtle way--first there were looks and then whispers, which we could sometimes overhear. From the snippets of conversations I overheard, I surmised that they didn't know we were in a concentration camp.

One time, I heard two middle aged women speculate about our identity,

"Who do you think they are," one whispered to the other.

"Maybe they are prostitutes."

"Yah, and so young some of them..."

Peeking at newspapers while waiting for our trains to arrive, we were reassured that the news from the front continued to be bad for the Germans. But things weren't good for us either. The winter took its toll in the number of illnesses in our camp. Mila came down with a fever and cough and was diagnosed as having pneumonia. She was quite sick and had to stay in the infirmary for a whole week. Shortly after she got better, Inga developed a bad cold and she, too, had to remain in the infirmary for several days. Renia and I somehow managed to avoid getting sick, in spite of working outdoors in the cold weather.

On the way to work, one of the SS officers engaged me in conversation. He must have been prompted by my appearance--my fair complexion and my reddish-blond hair that was just beginning to grow in, when he asked me:

"Are you Jewish?"

"Yes, I am," I answered.

"Were both of your parents Jewish?"

"Yes, they were."

He walked without talking for a while.

"You must have had some relatives who weren't Jewish. How about your grandparents?"

"They were all Jewish as well," I answered. I was

beginning to enjoy this conversation.

"But you don't look Jewish at all," he said, sounding perplexed.

I could think of an answer, but on the other hand, maybe the best answer was no answer. Let him mull that over by himself, I thought, as I continued walking silently alongside him. It must be hard for him to confront Hitler's rhetoric, and find fault with it. I was hoping that I had shattered, or at least made one person doubt the validity of one of Hitler's racial theories, one that Hitler himself belied by his appearance.

FEBRUARY 1945

In mid-winter we became itinerant workers. We didn't stay in any one place, but were taken to different sites according to need. After a snowfall we would be sent to clear streets in Hamburg, using heavy, clumsy, wooden snow shovels to push the snow to the side of the street. The work was excruciatingly difficult. The shovels were much too big for us--our undernourished bodies just didn't have the strength needed to do the job. Urged on by the SS officers, we worked almost beyond our endurance.

When that job was done, we were assigned to clearing rubble from recent bombings in a foundry in Hamburg. It was a large place and most of our work had to be done outdoors. In addition to our group, there were other workers in the place--French and Russian prisoners-of-war. They still wore their uniforms so they were easy to identify. The Frenchmen didn't pay any attention to us. They never even looked up when we were first brought to the site--they kept working, concentrating on their tasks. The Russians were different. Loud and boisterous, they seemed to be trying to defy the Germans whenever they could. The Russian group was much larger than the French. I don't know what they were doing exactly, but they were always milling about, smoking cigarettes and talking to each other.

It was very difficult to work all day outdoors in the cold weather. We didn't have any gloves and had to pick up the cold, heavy pieces of concrete with our bare hands. One particularly cold day, my hands were freezing and were numb

from the cold. During the lunch break I saw a fire that our SS guards kept going all day in a large oil drum, to keep their hands warm, while they were standing around watching us. They must have gone inside; there was no one at the drum. I walked over and held out my hands to warm them up. In a few minutes the warmth of the fire returned the feeling to my numb fingers and I was just about to return to work, when suddenly, I felt a blow to the back of my head. Startled, I turned around and found myself facing the enormous hulk of an SS officer who must have just come back from his lunch break. He hit me again, this time on the front of my face, with the full force of his huge hand. I was too stunned to cry out. I just stood there, wordless. But of course, I wasn't supposed to cry, or react in any way. I was supposed to be a silent target for the man's outrage.

"What are you doing here?" he shouted at me. "Go back to work! Don't you know the rules yet?"

I was standing there, shaking, afraid to even look at this brute of a man, his face contorted in a hateful grimace, his enormous fleshy hands ready to inflict another blow. The pain stung my face and the back of my head, but what hurt even more was the inhuman cruelty of the man. I hadn't done anything terrible. Wordlessly, I turned around and went back to my station, glad that he didn't see the tears streaming down my face.

Some of the Russian prisoners-of-war who were having their lunch at the time, noticed the incident and they loudly derided the SS officer in Russian. I didn't understand what

they were saying, but Renia, who spoke Russian fluently, did, and started talking to one of the men. He told her his name was Misha and that he was from Moscow. A friendly, easygoing fellow, he was impressed with Renia's knowledge of Russian. From that day on, he would sometimes stop to exchange a few words with her, giving her news about Allied victories and occasionally slipping her a sandwich.

The air raids continued, especially on our way back from work. They often caused delays for us, as we had to get off the streets and stay in air raid shelters. As much as I looked forward to Allied air raids, I preferred them to be during our working hours, not on our way home, when any delay meant a longer wait for our evening soup. When the air raids happened during our working day, we didn't go to an air raid shelter, but had to find shelter wherever we happened to be.

The Russians always greeted the air raid sirens with loud outbursts of joy. For some reason, the German officers didn't do anything to stop them--maybe they realized that it would be futile to do so.

APRIL 1945

The day started like any other day in Sasel. I got up, quickly washed my hands and face, and brushed my teeth. I was hungry and wanted to get my breakfast; the same breakfast that we got every morning; watery "ersatz" tea, and a piece of dry bread. As usual, I left the barracks with Inga, Mila and Renia. The long food line was moving briskly and soon we were ready for our daily walk to the train station. It was not to be. After breakfast, the usual morning "Appel" was superseded by a more formal head count. Herr Oberscharfuehrer was already there. In his usual nasty voice he announced that this morning we would not be going to work as usual, but would be transferred to a different camp. He explained that the camp we were being sent to would be similar to Camp Sasel--we would be working, the same as here.

The whole complement of SS officers was already assembled waiting to follow orders. Soon all the sick women were brought out from the infirmary, followed by the doctor and nurse. They took their places next to the rest of us. Last came the kitchen workers, a handsome group of young women whose rosy cheeks contrasted sharply with our pale, thin faces. The three "Kapos" were waiting on the side, "Kapo" Mirka as usual full of energy, her bravado propelled by her insecurity and fear. She always seemed vulnerable, even when she was screaming at the top of her lungs. Gerda, the Czech "Kapo", tough as a bull and seemingly bereft of any human emotion except anger, stood by, waiting for a command or happening which would allow her to scream, or

physically assault someone. The third "Kapo," Frieda, appeared relaxed--she could adjust to any situation.

After everyone was accounted for, our march began. The march didn't take long--we had nothing to carry but our soup bowl. In a few minutes we reached our destination, a small, deserted railroad station. Unlike the stations which we had used daily to go to work, this one was completely empty. We were told to line up in fives and were counted once more.

Just at that time, one of the inmates, a young, pretty girl, lurched suddenly out of the line and started to run quickly toward the back of the station. As we watched in stunned silence, she was instantly spotted by one of the SS officers, who grabbed her by the neck and forcibly brought her back to her place. Strangely, she wasn't beaten, but remained under the close guard of two SS men. Herr Oberscharfuehrer strode toward her, his sadistic face contorted with anger. He grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the line.

"This is a warning to you, damn Jews!" he screamed, while pummeling her with his fists, "If any of you will try this again, I promise you, you will be dealt with much more severely. Anyone who tries to escape will be shot immediately! Do you understand?"

We understood perfectly--the message was clear. Just then, a train whistle was heard, and a passenger train pulled into the station and stopped in front of us. Some of the SS officers from Sasel would be accompanying us to our new camp. One of them volunteered that they would be only

escorting us to the new, yet unnamed camp, and would be returning to Hamburg once they delivered us there. The questions about our destination remained unanswered.

In comparison with our transport from Auschwitz, this train was luxurious. The seats were upholstered and there was enough room for us to sit, although not comfortably. As the train sped ahead, I was preoccupied with our future. Could it be that the end of the war was coming? Will our tormentors let us survive, or will they find a way to do away with us? We were jealously clinging to life. Did the Germans have other plans for us?

My thoughts were interrupted by talk; guesses about our destination mostly, and surprise at our unexpected transfer. We were sure that we would be liberated in Hamburg. Why this sudden change?

The mood was somber until a voice rang out,

"Isn't anybody hungry yet? Enough of this talk, we have bread. Let's eat."

This received an enthusiastic vote of approval. We were given an extra bread ration before leaving Sasel. Soon almost everyone was eating. The sight of the bread aroused my hunger and I, too, took out my bread and started to eat. It was only a piece of dry bread, but it felt like cake to me.

As we were eating, conversations started again. We began to reminisce about our lives before the war. We had to remind ourselves that we weren't always slaves, that we once had families, parents and siblings, that we had once

been free. I thought of my mother, buried in the Lodz ghetto. But my father might be still alive, and some day when the war was over, we might find each other.

It had gotten dark. The talk subsided. Many of the women were sleeping. I closed my eyes. I, too, was eager to sleep. The day's happenings took their toll. I started to doze when the voice of Inga awakened me.

"I am going to sleep," she announced, as she climbed up to the luggage compartment above the seat and curled her long body to fit into it. If I weren't so exhausted, I would have found her actions funny, but all I wanted now was to sleep.

At dawn, we were roused by the SS officers, their loud voices rudely interrupting our dreams.

"We are reaching our destination. Remember that the train will be stopping in a town. You must leave the train quietly and in an orderly fashion. Follow instructions. Do not try to escape. Any attempts will be punished severely."

We filed out of the train onto a small station, which, except for a few railroad personnel was deserted. Again, we were counted and told to line up for marching. It turned out to be a three kilometer march, past the village of Hohne Bergen, onto a country road lined on both sides with trees and surrounded by green fields. It presented a peaceful image. As we continued walking, I became increasingly tired. The sun was beating down on us, and our heavy coats became burdensome. Like many others, I shed my coat. It seemed to

me like this walk would never end, when we came to a gate. Lined up on both sides were officers in unfamiliar uniforms, their rifles pointed at us as if ready to shoot. They ordered us to stop. We were counted again. Next, lead by some of the officers, we entered the camp.

A pervasive stench was in the air; it was indescribable, but somehow, I knew it was the stench of death. After a while we were told to stop in front of a huge barrack. It was completely empty inside; no bunks, nothing. Several windows let in the daylight. All five hundred of us were to be housed in this one room. Haphazardly, people started lowering themselves to the floor, as though to claim a territory, but there was so little space, it was hard to find any room to sit.

This place didn't look like a work camp. All we could see from the windows were barracks, just like ours. No one outside, except mountains of dead bodies. What kind of horrors went on here? I was too scared to guess. A female SS officer entered the barracks. Like most of them, she was hefty and tough-looking. In her deep, raspy voice she announced,

"This is the Concentration Camp Bergen-Belsen. You have to abide by the rules and stay inside unless you have permission to use the latrine."

This, as we later found out, was a strange rule, as most of the time there was no one there to give permission.

The people who ran this camp didn't need to rely on crematoria in order to murder its inmates. By providing

unlivable conditions with no food or sanitary facilities, it was easy for them to achieve the same goal.

Within several days, our group of close to five hundred women who had survived eight months at Camp Sasel, was decimated, from the lack of food and water, as well as epidemics of typhus and typhoid fever. It was hard to believe that in the course of one week, a great many of the mostly young women were dead or dying. This must have been happening all over the camp, as the piles of corpses grew exponentially with every passing day. This was not a place where one could survive. This time we needed a miracle, without which we were sure to wind up on a pile of dead bodies sooner or later. We could do nothing but try to save our strength.

Today, April thirteenth, I would be celebrating my eighteenth birthday. Actually, celebrating wasn't quite the word. I might not make it through the day, but could death be worse than this kind of existence? If I died today nobody would miss me. My friends, Renia, Mila and Inga, would mourn me, perhaps, if they had any strength left, but then, they might die too. Today, on the thirteenth of April, nineteen forty five, somewhere in the German province of Saxony, amid farmlands and orchards, in the death camp Bergen-Belsen, desolate and charred, its stench pervading the air, no one had any emotions left. We were benumbed, hollow and uncaring. We had seen so much, suffered so much this past week, that nothing moved us anymore.

In this one week people had died all around me. They

expired quietly, sometimes with a self-conscious moan, as if to say, "Let me go, it's too crowded here, let me leave." They left--at least their souls did--their wretched bodies remained on the floor, together with those still living. Occasionally, some women who were still strong enough, would carry a few of the feather-light bodies to the huge heap outside. Hundreds upon hundreds of bodies growing skyward every day, naked, skeleton-like, their open eyes hollowly staring, accusing, cursing.

Complete anarchy reigned here. There were no leaders. Nobody wanted the privilege anymore--nobody gave a damn. There was no food, nothing to supervise, nothing to fight over. The transition from the orderly, structured life of Camp Sasel to this landscape of death was almost as great as the transition from the ghetto to Auschwitz eight months ago. As in Auschwitz, we were languishing here, but here there was no order, none of the regimentation which in Auschwitz dominated our daily existence. There were no "Appels" here, no counting of heads. We were suspended in a sort of no-man's-land, a nightmare out of which the only exit seemed to be death. Since we arrived here six days ago, we had received no food, only some water, occasionally, at the whim of our guards, who, we found out, were Hungarian. The Germans were hardly ever there; perhaps, knowing that the end was near, they were too preoccupied with their fate. Even on our arrival in Bergen-Belsen the soldiers who "greeted" us were mostly Hungarian. For a fleeting moment this offered a ray of hope. "Maybe the Hungarians will be good to us?"

These hopes were soon dispelled when we saw their hostile stance, their eyes of steel, their bayonets at the ready. They were not our friends. They were enemies, waiting to kill at the slightest pretext. We soon found out how slight a pretext it had to be. The first women to venture out in search of water or a latrine, were pushed with their rifles, kicked with the immaculately shined cavalry boots, or confronted with the muzzle of a gun aimed dead center at the heart. The Germans had found reliable deputies who were eager to carry out their duties with scrupulous dedication. But, no matter what, we still had to use the latrine. We would sneak out furtively, trying to be as inconspicuous as humanly possible. Still being cautious, still clinging to life, for whatever it was worth.

On the morning of my birthday, I opened my eyes and carefully picked myself up from the floor where I had been sleeping, my body overlapping other bodies crouched or sprawled in bizarre positions; intertwined like roots of an ancient, grotesque tree. I was stiff and aching and needed to move my legs. Stepping gingerly over bodies, dead or alive, I made my way outside. At the latrine, several young girls from Sasel were huddled together, whispering. I joined the group and was told that the girls were planning to sneak out to a nearby field of turnips--the big, yellow vegetables which had constituted a major part of our wartime diet, and steal as many of them as they could carry. The risk was great, but our hunger was greater, and the turnips, the only source of food within reach, were so close and so

easy to get.

"Are you coming with us?" someone asked me.

I hesitated only for a brief moment; the thought of the juicy vegetables made my mouth water. I could fairly taste their crisp, sweet crunchiness. My stomach was so empty it ached.

"I am," I replied quickly, afraid that I might change my mind. It was a desperate act. The field where the turnips grew was outside the camp, but the only thing separating it from the camp was a barbed wire fence which surrounded it. The area adjacent to the camp was always patrolled by the Hungarian guards, but this morning they didn't seem to be there. One of the girls spotted a hole in the barbed wire big enough for a person to slip through. We still wore the striped dresses we had gotten in Camp Sasel. It would be easy to hide the turnips in their folds.

"Let's go."

We dispersed in different directions, not wanting to attract attention. There were no soldiers to be seen. In our group were two sisters I knew from Sasel. The older one, Janka, was about eighteen, a tough compactly-built young woman with the appearance of a Polish peasant; her hair so light, it appeared almost white. Janka had been luckier than most--she had worked in the kitchen in Sasel. Every scrap of food she could spare went to her younger sister, Basia, who spent the entire time we were in Sasel in the camp infirmary. Basia had tuberculosis. Here, in Bergen-Belsen, there was no infirmary for the sick. The

delicate and frail Basia, decided over her sister's objections to join us this morning.

As we approached the field, the quiet landscape stretched peacefully in front of us, belying the gravity of our undertaking. The field extended as far as our eyes could see. The barracks seemed far, far away.

For an instant I forgot where I was. I felt free and in my imagination I was out for a walk on a lovely spring morning; the morning of my eighteenth birthday.

Eighteen.... It was a milestone of sorts, a coming of age. But that in itself had no meaning for me; the war had put an end to my childhood long ago. Yet, here I was, about to perform a forbidden task likely to be punishable by death. Was it a rite of passage I had to perform today in order to live? I had been on the brink of death before; how could it matter? It was just an inconsequential gesture, nothing more.

But this time it was different--the next few days were crucial. The war was coming to an end; it was only a matter of days. I could feel it everywhere, even in the frantic cruelty of the Hungarian guards. To die now would be somehow sacrilegious. Could the years of unspeakable atrocities have been in vain? Will I end up dead in a field of vegetables on my eighteenth birthday? I wanted the turnips desperately, not just for myself, but for Mila, Renia and Inga, who were asleep in the barrack when I left this morning. I could picture them when I returned with the turnips; taking giant bites out of the fresh juicy flesh, the rough texture making loud, crunching noises as we ate.

This picture made it all worthwhile. In the past, I had always avoided unnecessary risks. In Hamburg, one could occasionally pick up a morsel of food left behind in the street by a kind soul, but it always meant fighting for it with the other women who also wanted it. As hungry as I was, I preferred not to get involved in the struggle that always ensued, for fear of a beating from the SS guards. Picking up, or accepting food was strictly forbidden.

But now it was different. I couldn't face another day without something to eat. The thought of dying from hunger, like so many of our women had, since our arrival in Bergen-Belsen, was scary. I couldn't cease to exist now, so close to the end of the war. I couldn't let it happen. I had to survive to let the world know that I was here.

I lost track of time. The other women were busily picking the vegetables. I had work to do.... Soon I had three large turnips in the folds of my skirt. When the signal to go back was given, I was ready. I followed the others to the opening in the fence. I was the last one to leave. As I went through the hole, my heart sank--a whole row of Hungarian guards was facing us, rifles aimed, ready to shoot. Here we were, out in the open, perfect targets.

"Halt!" one of the officers shouted.

Panic ensued as we were running, scattering in all directions, letting the turnips fall to the ground. And then the shots--one after another, their sound exploding in my ears again and again, and then, girls falling, falling like the vegetables that spilled from our skirts. And still they were

shooting, turning as they did, to get as many victims as they could.

I don't know how I made it back to the barracks still clutching my skirt in my hand. I had one turnip left. As I entered the barrack I made my way to the spot where my friends were sitting, and dropped exhausted to the floor beside them.

"You went with them?" asked Renia, a mixture of awe and incredulity in her voice.

"Yes. Here, eat. I picked it for all of us."

I could barely talk, my voice was shaking so. Almost instantly a knife appeared from somewhere, the turnip was cut up, our teeth greedily sinking into its flesh.

"Ohh, goood," Inga exclaimed between bites, her slow, deliberate accent making the Polish words as always, funny sounding. I looked around. Some of the girls had made it back to the barracks, but not all. Four of them were missing, killed by bullets fired by the Hungarian officers.

Basia was crying hysterically. Her sister, Janka, was one of those who didn't make it back--her life lost for a turnip. The sick, frail Basia was unharmed. As for me, shaken as I was by the experience, I felt that I had performed my rite of passage.

Two days went by and nothing happened. There wasn't much spirit left in any of us. The barrack was as quiet as a morgue. I was overcome by a stupor--I was too weak to get up. My friends looked sick, too. We didn't even have the strength to talk to each other; it was too much of an

effort. That afternoon I heard a noise coming from a distance. At first I didn't pay it much attention, but the noise persisted. Slowly, I raised myself up and tried to reach the window, but the way was blocked by prostrate bodies. I made my way out of the barrack. In the distance, the barbed wire fence was lined with inmates. What were they doing? Didn't they know that they couldn't go near the fence? As if in a dream, I kept going toward the fence. There were soldiers on the other side. Not German soldiers. They looked tired and dirty, but they were smiling at us and yelling out something in a language I couldn't understand. I later found out it was English.

The British army liberated the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp that day, April fifteenth, nineteen forty five. No resistance was offered by the Germans. Not a shot was fired. Those of us who were strong enough, walked over to the barbed wire fence to watch the British soldiers march into the camp. We were too weak to celebrate--there was no loud cheering, but our liberators were met with tears streaming down our wan, emaciated faces. It was finally over. The war was over for us and we were still alive! The fifteenth of April was truly a beautiful day.

LIBERATION - APRIL 1945

When the British troops liberated Bergen-Belsen on April 15, 1945, conditions in the camp were deplorable. Most of those who had survived the German atrocities were in advanced stages of malnutrition, and in spite of efforts of organizations such as UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency) and The American Joint Distribution Committee, a Jewish philanthropic organization, a great number of former inmates of the concentration camp were dying. It was no longer because we didn't have anything to eat. One of the reasons most of us were getting sick was due to the food given to us by well-meaning people. Before a kitchen was set up, we received army T-Rations. I remember the little cans of baked beans which were passed out. It was unfamiliar food to us, but was regarded as a delicacy. We were also given chocolate bars, ordinarily a treat, but to our stomachs, long unaccustomed to such rich food, the transition from starvation to abundance proved disastrous. The majority of survivors had to be hospitalized. Each day, the green British army ambulances had to transport hundreds of people to the hastily set-up hospital in the part of the camp formerly occupied by German and Hungarian officers.

My friends, Mila, Inga and Renia were all taken to the hospital, suffering from a variety of symptoms, including high fever and dysentery. I had somehow managed to avoid getting seriously ill, and remained in the old camp awaiting resettlement.

I can remember the first couple of weeks after the

liberation only through a haze. Conditions were chaotic. I recall a lot of military personnel in the heavy khaki uniforms of the British armed forces milling about the camp. UNRRA personnel set up temporary headquarters in the newly named DP (Displaced Persons) Camp Bergen-Belsen, and began to register those survivors who were well enough to endure the long lines. The American Joint Distribution Committee personnel were busy distributing clothing and food. We were disinfected from head to toe with heavy doses of DDT to rid us of vermin. The old barracks were abandoned and burned down for fear that the epidemics of typhoid fever and typhus, which had proliferated there would claim many more lives. The piles of dead bodies which made up the Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp landscape, were transferred to huge, newly-dug communal graves. The work was carried out by former SS officers and other German camp personnel. British military authorities had "invited" German civilians, including the mayor of the nearby town of Hohnen Bergen, to watch the burial procedures. It was not a pretty sight.

After Mila, Inga and Renia were hospitalized, I remained by myself, living in the open, sleeping on the ground, and cooking on improvised campfires. I didn't know a soul--no one from camp Sasel seemed to be there. Where were they? Weren't there any survivors from Sasel, or were they all hospitalized? I just didn't know.

One afternoon, I had dozed off in the sun, when in my slumber, I thought I heard a familiar voice. I looked up and saw a girl from camp Sasel--someone I knew quite well. She

was talking to me,

"What are you doing here in this heap? Why don't you come with me? We have a room in the new camp."

It didn't take me long to scramble up and follow Rysia to the new camp. The room she was sharing with four other young women was luxurious by our standards. There were three double bunk beds, a stove, a table and several chairs. These were the barracks that were formerly occupied by German and Hungarian officers. There were toilets and communal showers on each floor.

The other women, in addition to Rysia and her cousin, Mala, were two sisters whom I knew from camp Sasel; Zosia, the camp nurse, and her older sister, Hanka. Two of their sisters, the youngest, Pepa, who had worked in the kitchen in Sasel, and the oldest, Ruta, had also survived, but were hospitalized, both seriously ill. Ruta died a few days later. Pepa remained in the hospital for several weeks but eventually recovered.

After a few weeks of living in the DP camp, Rysia, newly clothed through the auspices of the American Joint Distribution Committee, decided to venture out of camp. She settled in the city of Hanover, where she met and later married a fellow survivor from Lodz. Her cousin, Mala, soon followed her there. I remained in the room with the three sisters, Hanka, Zosia and Pepa. Sharing the room with them was a lucky break for me. We became close friends and remained together until we left the camp. In camp we were known as the four sisters. Zosia, Pepa and I had blond hair

and fair complexions. We even looked alike; only Hanka, their oldest sister, was a brunette.

After the liberation, a new chapter of my life had begun, full of hope and expectations. We didn't realize at the time that it would take those of us who wanted to emigrate to the United States more than four years to reach that goal; years that were wasted, spent in virtual captivity in the Displaced Persons Camp Bergen-Belsen.

Food in camp was plentiful. Each quadrant of barracks had a soup kitchen where our food was cooked and distributed. I got to know one of the kitchen workers, Fred, who used to visit us frequently, sometimes bringing tasty tidbits from the kitchen. An avowed Zionist, Fred wanted to go to Palestine as soon as possible. At the time, he was involved with a group called "Aliyah Beth," aiding people who wanted to go to Palestine. Fred would accompany them to Belgium and Holland, where they had to wait their turn to sail on illegal ships. Fred eventually left for Palestine on one of the ships and settled on a kibutz.

The DP Camp soon became an organized entity, headed by a Jewish DP, named Rosensaft. Shipments of clothing, mostly used, began to arrive from the United States. We also received wonderful butter from Denmark and flatbread and other food from Sweden. The food would be distributed by block leaders. Each building was called a block and had a block leader who was responsible for keeping track of the number of occupants, the distribution of food, and the cleanliness of the common areas.

Health clinics staffed by survivors and doctors from the United States and England, and were sponsored by the American Joint Distribution Committee. A school opened. I wanted to enroll in the high school section, but the young women I lived with discouraged me. They thought we should all work. Pepa and I got jobs in the newly opened dental clinic. Zosia, who was the nurse in Camp Sasel, became a doctor's assistant.

As soon as I was able to, I signed up for English lessons given by a member of the British Jewish Relief Unit. As my English progressed, I started working as an assistant to the supervisor of the camp school, Renee, a young, pretty woman from London, who was with the Jewish Relief Unit. When Renee decided to return to England, I went to work for the American Joint Distribution Committee. I worked there until I left for the US.

At first I worked in the busy Search Office dedicated to finding relatives of survivors. Shortly after the liberation, lists of survivors started to appear and were distributed to all camp agencies. I searched in vain for my father's name. Nor did I find names of any of my relatives, but I learned that two of my first cousins, Saba and Fela Laufer had survived the war and were living in Displaced Persons camps in the American Zone of West Germany awaiting transports to the United States. They had both gotten married shortly after liberation. Their oldest sister, Edzia, who spent the war years in Palestine, had volunteered to join the Jewish Brigade, an offshoot of the British army, and was stationed

in Egypt during the war. She later married and settled in Tel Aviv.

While in the DP camp, Bergen-Belsen, I was introduced to two women who turned out to be my father's cousins. They had lived in Warsaw before the war and managed to survive on Aryan papers. They came to the Bergen-Belsen after the war and both decided to emigrate to Palestine. The rest of my extended family was gone, joining the millions of victims of the Holocaust.

Mila and Inga were sent to Sweden with a large hospital transport in order to recuperate. Renia left the hospital for Poland, in the vain hope of finding some of her family. Instead, she met and later married a fellow concentration camp survivor.

Going back to Poland was not a consideration for me. There were too many bad memories associated with that country. Also, I knew that there was nothing to return to. Had my father survived the war, he would have certainly found me by now. Returning to Poland would be like living with ghosts. There was nothing left for me there but an old cemetery in a remote part of the Lodz ghetto where my mother's remains lay.

I had a need to start anew. I had considered Israel, I even visited there before emigrating to the US, but living in a country beset by war frightened me. I decided to join the large majority of survivors who were waiting for the United States to open its doors to those of us who had waited for four-and-a-half years for their dream to come true.

That dream materialized for me in November, 1949. In

the beginning of November I received my emigration papers and left the DP Camp for Bremen, the port of departure. After a two days wait, I sailed for New York on the US Army Transport, "SS GENERAL TAYLOR." The trip was rough, the weather stormy, but I was in great spirits. Unlike the majority of the passengers, I was not sea-sick and worked on the ship as an interpreter. My English lessons in Bergen-Belsen had come in handy.

We arrived in New York harbor at the dawn of November 11th--the Statue of Liberty greeting us with her majestic appearance as we set ashore. There she was, luminous and huge, the hope and refuge of the needy. She was beautiful! I felt secure--I knew right away that I had finally found the place where I wanted to spend the rest of my life.

